

**THE 'AGE' OF DIVERSITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN  
EMPLOYMENT: NEW DISCRIMINATION AGAINST OLDER  
WORKERS**

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*'Older people do not form an exclusive group, but one of which every individual will eventually become a member. The white racist will never be black; the male sexist will never be female; but the young ageist will grow old'.*

(Scrutton, 1990: 14)



## Abstract

There exists a considerable body of evidence to suggest that older workers are increasingly being excluded from the workplace in the UK and elsewhere. Commonly, such exclusion is viewed as being due, at least in part, to the use of discriminatory practices by employers towards older workers and jobseekers. Many previous writers have sought to explain age discrimination in employment as the result of the cognitive biases of individual employers (e.g. Warr & Pennington, 1993) or as the outcome of inequitable social structures which favour younger workers over older workers (e.g. Phillipson, 1982). Recent measures promoted by the UK Government to address age discrimination in the workplace (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) have accordingly rested on the promotion to employers of the principles of diversity and equal opportunities in employment. Drawing on work which has examined the explanatory power of age itself (Bodily, 1991; 1994) and on recent work within discursive psychology, I argue in this study that age, diversity and equal opportunities in employment can be usefully understood as discursive resources available to and used by participants within everyday social interaction. The aims of the study were (1) to examine the views of both older jobseekers and employers, (2) to consider the accounts of the participants for aspects of current practices, and (3) to analyse these accounts for the actions which were achieved by their use. Age discrimination in employment can thus be usefully viewed as social practice. I analyse data obtained from interviews conducted with older jobseekers and employers and from written equal opportunities policies of organisations. Older jobseekers frequently make claims for the advantages of older workers, as compared to others, on grounds of age alone. In however making sense of their own experiences and of employers' practices, they frequently orient to age as a factor operating against them and use age to account for their lack of current employment. They do not treat age discrimination as a matter for which they have to account. Employers, while making claims which appear to be inclusive of workers in general and older workers in particular, describe their workforces and recruitment practices without reference to the numbers of older workers employed. When challenged, they account for the apparent marginalisation of older workers within their organisations in terms of factors outwith their control and in ways which make such practices less visible and less open to public scrutiny. Although each group has available to it various discursive resources for making sense of current employment, age itself is that most commonly used or relied upon in this context. These uses of age moreover sustain current discriminatory practices against older workers and make age available for continued use. Age discrimination in employment can thus be better understood as social practice than as the results of employers' cognitions or the outcomes of social structure. The implications for current and future attempts to address age discrimination in the workplace and possible directions for future research are discussed.

## Contents

	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	vii
	<b>Declaration</b>	viii
	<b>Overview</b>	1
	Introduction to the study	1
	Structure of the Thesis	4
<b>1</b>	<b>Age discrimination in employment</b>	10
	An ageing population and a changing workforce	10
	Discrimination against older workers	14
	Measures to address age discrimination	15
	Anti-discrimination legislation	16
	The UK Government approach and the Code of Practice	21
	Further developments	30
<b>2</b>	<b>Review of previous research</b>	33
	Introduction	33
	Age discrimination as individual prejudice	35
	Age discrimination and social inequalities	52
	Age as a mundane resource and an interactional topic	62
	Aims of the present study	76
<b>3</b>	<b>Method of the study</b>	81
	Introduction	81
	Discourse analysis	82
	Preliminary study	90
	Data collection for the main study	95
	Data analysis	103
<b>4</b>	<b>Jobseekers and older workers</b>	110
	Introduction	110
	Describing differences between older and younger workers	111

	Responding to negative attributions	120
	Discussion	137
<b>5</b>	<b>Age and individual experience</b>	<b>142</b>
	Introduction	142
	Age and personal abilities	143
	Age and jobs	153
	Age and looking for work	159
	Discussion	169
<b>6</b>	<b>Jobseekers and age discrimination</b>	<b>174</b>
	Introduction	174
	Age and suitability of jobs	176
	Re-characterising age discrimination	182
	Age discrimination against older workers	187
	Discussion	201
<b>7</b>	<b>Employers and equal opportunities for older workers</b>	<b>206</b>
	Introduction	206
	Age and equal opportunities policies	207
	Equal opportunities in practice	216
	Discussion	240
	Accounting practices and organisational practices	244
	A 'new ageism'	247
<b>8</b>	<b>Employers, older jobseekers and the management of diversity</b>	<b>250</b>
	Introduction	250
	Attributing positive characteristics to older workers	251
	Responding to negative attributions	254
	Age and recruitment	260
	Older jobseekers and recruitment	266
	Discussion	272
<b>9</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>280</b>
	Introduction	280
	Views of older workers are positive	281

The views of older workers are irrelevant to employment	283
Older jobseekers negotiate marginalised identities	286
Employers' practices constitute 'new ageism'	289
Age is a mundane explanatory resource	292
Both jobseekers and employers social maintain ageism	295
Evaluation of the study	297
Future research	301
<b>Appendix 1:</b> Protocol for focus groups with jobseekers	305
<b>Appendix 2:</b> Jobseekers participating in one-to-one interviews	307
<b>Appendix 3:</b> Protocol for interviews with jobseekers	308
<b>Appendix 4:</b> Organisations which supplied written equal opportunities policies	310
<b>Appendix 5:</b> Participants in interviews with employers	311
<b>Appendix 6:</b> Protocol for interviews with employers	312
<b>Appendix 7:</b> Transcription notation	314
<b>References</b>	315
<b>Publications</b>	327

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I declare that this Thesis has been composed by me and that it is my own work. The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

27 June 2001

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# Overview

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## *Introduction to the study*

The topic of the present study is age discrimination in the workplace against older workers. Discrimination in employment against workers or prospective workers on the grounds of age, although not a new phenomenon, is one which of late has attracted ever-increasing attention from researchers, policy-makers and others. It has become viewed increasingly as a major current social issue with considerable implications for employers and our society generally, as well as for the workers and jobseekers who experience the employment difficulties first-hand. At the same time, practices that exclude older workers take place in a changing social climate in which the UK Government has recently introduced measures intended specifically to address age discrimination in employment (Department for Education and Employment, 1999). The central argument of this thesis is that an understanding of age discrimination requires us to take account both of the everyday interactions within which the exclusion of older workers occurs and of the fluid and changing

wider social context. My aim in this study is to offer such an understanding, by applying the method of discursive social psychology to the topic of age discrimination in employment.

Although much previous research has been carried out into age discrimination against older workers, there are a number of problems with this research. One reason for the current lack of a useful understanding of age discrimination in practice is that, to date, it has not attracted the breadth of research interest which has been devoted to other forms of discrimination, such as racism or sexism. Most work on age discrimination has come from approaches which emphasise the importance of individual views, in the form of attitudes or stereotypes as opposed to the social context, or which concentrate on the wider social structure at the expense of everyday interaction. As a consequence, the shortcomings of previous explanations have largely been built in from the outset, resulting from the methods adopted or the assumptions left unquestioned by the writers within these strands of research.

The problems inherent in such approaches to studying discrimination have been highlighted in recent developments in social psychology. In the 'turn to discourse', numerous writers have argued that the study of discourse, social interaction and context can overcome the difficulties and assumptions of previous work in relation to many aspects of everyday life. The application of a discursive approach has produced, in particular, useful accounts of sexism (e.g. Gill, 1993; Wetherell, Stiven and Potter, 1987) and racism (e.g. Wetherell and Potter, 1992) as social practices. As yet however, no work on age discrimination in general, let alone age



discrimination in employment in particular, has been conducted from a discursive psychological perspective.

In this study therefore, I apply the method of discursive psychology to the issue of age discrimination in the workplace. I examine the descriptions of current employment practices, older workers and relevant topics obtained from interviews conducted with older jobseekers and employers, along with discourse contained within employers' written policies. Analysis of the discourse obtained from these sources shows the discursive actions being performed by both jobseekers and employers in settings immediately relevant to everyday employment and the resources used by both sets of participants within these. Such analysis produces an account of the ways in which both jobseekers and employers make sense of practices in the current context of employment, and accordingly gives an understanding of the exclusion of older workers as ongoing social practice.

Although the topic of the present study is discrimination against older workers, it must be acknowledged that experience of age discrimination is not restricted to any one group of people. Discrimination can equally affect those who experience discrimination on the grounds of insufficient age which often carries assumptions of insufficient experience or abilities for particular jobs (Employers Forum on Age, 2000a; Loretto, Duncan and White, 2000; Worsley, 1996). An investigation into age discrimination and its effects across all points of the life cycle however would not be possible within the scope of this study. Accordingly it is discrimination on the grounds of advancing age which provides the focus for the present work.

## ***Structure of the Thesis***

In Chapter One, I begin by considering the evidence from UK Government statistics, supported by the findings of many studies, which suggests that over the last thirty years older workers have increasingly been excluded from the workforce. Age discrimination as the explanation, at least in part, for this exclusion will be introduced. Thereafter attempts to address age discrimination in this country and elsewhere will be reviewed, leading on to a description of the measures recently introduced by the UK Government to address age discrimination in the workplace and which form part of the current wider employment context.

I review in Chapter Two previous work on age discrimination in employment in particular, together with some studies of age more generally. While the increasing awareness of age discrimination in our society has generated much research interest in recent years, most of this research has come from within two narrow perspectives. Within the first of these age discrimination is explained as arising from prejudice on the part of employers towards older workers, while in the second it is viewed as resulting from inequitable social structures which favour younger rather than older workers. Work from within each of these strands is considered together with its assumptions and limitations. I then turn to two sets of studies that deal with aspects of age other than age discrimination. The work of Bodily (1991, 1994) offers a reconceptualisation of age as a discursive resource, rather than being an individual attribute or part of social structure. As a resource it is used by people in situations of

non-employment and potentially at least is available for similar use in other contexts, such as that of unemployment. In addition to being a discursive resource, age and age-related attributes can also be viewed as matters which are negotiated in everyday social interaction, as will be seen in a review of the work of the Couplands and their colleagues. These two sets of findings, that age is a resource and that is a matter of negotiation, are used to develop a statement of the aims of the present study and the approach adopted for the research.

Chapter Three sets out the method used in this study. The chapter begins with an introduction to the two strands of discourse analysis which have been most influential in recent social psychology. This leads to a description of the analytic approach adopted in this study. Prior to the main study an initial investigation was carried out by way of two focus groups conducted with older jobseekers. Data for the main study were collected from the following sources: interviews conducted with older jobseekers who were recruited through a number of local jobcentres; written equal opportunities policies obtained from a range of medium to large employers; and, interviews carried out with Human Resources and Recruitment Managers of medium to large organisations. All interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed and all data were then coded and analysed in ways which reflected the aims of the study. Thus, for instance, transcription and coding were carried out to a level which emphasised the readability of the material and the broad argumentative patterns of the participants. The methods employed in the preliminary investigation, in data collection for the main study and in data analysis are described in greater detail in Chapter Three.

In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I examine the sense made by older jobseekers of current employment practices. These chapters focus respectively on their views of older workers in current employment, on the jobseekers' own experiences of looking for work and on their views of employers' practices. Chapter Four looks at the views expressed by jobseekers of older workers in general. Commonly these are positive qualities, said to come with age, which it is claimed make older workers better employees than younger workers. Other participants challenge the views of employers. When jobseekers are asked specifically about three negative attributions stereotypically associated with older workers, they respond in several ways. Although sometimes not explicitly questioned, negative characteristics are often resisted on the grounds that they are not age-related or that the characteristic described favours older instead of younger workers. The identities constructed for older workers are thus usually, though not invariably, highly positive. These however are not identities that the participants claim for themselves.

Chapter Five examines the identities which the participants construct for themselves. Here the jobseekers are seen to orient to age rather differently than the ways age was constructed in Chapter Four. Instead of being offered as the basis of positive qualities, age instead provides a negative focus. Age is proposed to be a factor which causes possible reductions in personal abilities, brings some restriction on job selection and which accounts for the participants' lack of employment. Other considerations are also apparent, such as the role of personal choice and other factors in job selection and lack of current work. Two main discursive strategies,

namely an age discrimination strategy and an age avoidance strategy are identified from the participants' responses. Participants use these strategies to make sense of their own experiences of looking for work.

In Chapter Six, I conclude my examination of the jobseekers' responses by looking at their responses to questions which specifically address age discrimination. Here age is used again in several ways. It is available as the basis for claims for the greater suitability of older workers for particular jobs, while it is said to bring a relative decline in physical skills in certain situations. Age discrimination is offered as the basis for many participants' accounts of lack of employment. Other descriptions of practices are also found, with some jobseekers offering positive descriptions of employers as fair and reasonable people. Age discrimination and age avoidance strategies are again used in accounting for their lack of work. A third discursive strategy which re-characterises age discrimination is also found. These strategies provide participants with a range of resources for making sense of their own experiences of being out of work in the context of current employment. The participants use these strategies to account for their lack of employment. They do not however treat age discrimination as a matter for which they have to account.

In the following two chapters I turn to analysis of the data obtained from employers. Chapter Seven looks at analysis of material from written equal opportunities policies and employers' interview responses to questions on two topics. These topics covered the organisational commitment to equal opportunities and the current employment of older workers within each organisation. I argue that the place of age

in written policies is ambivalent. Further, employers' verbal claims to be committed to equal opportunities for older workers and jobseekers are inconsistent with their own descriptions of their practices. These practices are accounted for in ways which make invisible the roles of employers and justify the exclusion of older workers from these organisations. These forms of accounting show a new form of discrimination against older workers or a 'new ageism'.

In Chapter Eight, I examine the responses of the employers to questions on two other topics. These topics relate to the interviewees' views of older workers and their recruitment practices towards older jobseekers. Employers attribute to older workers a range of positive qualities on the basis of age itself and challenge the suggested attribution to older workers of any negative characteristics. Age is claimed to be of little importance in recruitment. Again though, notwithstanding the identities constructed for older workers and their claims that age is unimportant, employers make no reference to the recruitment of older workers to their organisations. In some cases the place of older workers in employment becomes wholly invisible, through employers' reference to the management of diversity. As in Chapter Seven, these forms of accounting used by employers display new discrimination against older workers and are consistent with findings from many other studies into discrimination in other forms.

Finally, Chapter Nine concludes the thesis with a statement of conclusions based on the main findings. These are as follows: (1) views of older workers are positive; (2) the views of older workers are irrelevant to employment; (3) older jobseekers

negotiate marginalised identities; (4) employers' practices constitute 'new ageism'; (5) age is a mundane explanatory resource, and (6) both jobseekers and employers socially maintain ageism. This chapter also provides an evaluation of the study and its contribution to an understanding of age discrimination against older workers. Possible directions for future research are also discussed.

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## Chapter one

### Age discrimination in employment

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#### *An ageing population and a changing workforce*

The shape of the population of the United Kingdom has in recent times undergone a marked change. In 1971, 17,219,860 people in the UK or 31 per cent of the total population were aged 19 or less. By 1998 this figure had fallen to 15,156,925 (25.9 per cent)<sup>1</sup>. Over the same period, the number of people aged 50 or above increased from 17,456,600 to 18,479,365, a rise in relative terms from 30.8 per cent to 31.7 per cent. In addition, the average life expectancy has risen, from an overall average figure of 50 years at the beginning of the 20th century to an average of 77.8 years for men and 81.9 years for women by the end of that century. On current predictions, by 2021 the numbers for all groups aged 44 or less will have fallen considerably from their present levels, reductions in these groups being matched by

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<sup>1</sup> All figures from International Labour Office (ILO) (1975; 1999).



corresponding increases in the numbers of 45 year olds and above. As a consequence, the mean age of the UK population is set to continue rising well into the 21st century.

The increasing age profile of the population over this period has been accompanied by a significant change in the age profile of the workforce of the United Kingdom. This change however is not in the direction which might be expected. While the age profile of the population has been getting steadily older, that of the UK workforce is becoming increasingly younger.

Table 1 Economic activity rates by age group 1971 - 1998

		20-49	50+
1971	total population	21,149,140	17,145,600
	economically active	15,925,985	7,554,876
	economic activity rate	75.6%	44.1%
1981	total population	21,597,714	17,407,318
	economically active	17,132,990	6,676,364
	economic activity rate	79.3%	38.4%
1993	total population	24,898,000	17,645,000
	economically active	20,751,000	5,862,000
	economic activity rate	83.3%	33.2%
1998	total population	24,681,129	18,479,365
	economically active	20,473,937	6,451,472
	economic activity rate	83.0%	34.1%

*Source: ILO (1975, 1982, 1994, 1999)*

As can be seen from Table 1, the economic activity rate for those aged 50 or above fell from 44.1 per cent in 1971 to 34.1 per cent in 1998. During the same period, the economic activity rate for those aged 20 to 49 increased from 75.6 per cent to 83.0 per cent. Economic activity for the 50 plus age group fell not just in relative terms but also by over 1 million people in absolute terms, against the background of an increasing number of people within this age group in the UK population.

The economic activity rates for older male and female workers over this period are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Economic activity rates for age 50+ by gender 1971 - 1998

		men	women	total
1971	total population	7,505,782	9,639,818	17,145,600
	economically active	4,919,556	2,635,320	7,554,876
	economic activity rate	65.5%	27.3%	44.1%
1981	total population	7,701,325	9,705,993	17,407,318
	economically active	4,288,566	2,387,798	6,676,364
	economic activity rate	55.7%	24.8%	38.4%
1993	total population	7,948,000	9,694,000	17,645,000
	economically active	3,427,000	2,434,000	5,862,000
	economic activity rate	43.1%	25.1%	33.2%
1998	total population	8,473,838	10,005,527	18,479,365
	economically active	3,715,305	2,736,167	6,451,472
	economic activity rate	43.8%	27.3%	34.1%

*Source: ILO (1975, 1982, 1994, 1999)*

The decline in economic activity of male older workers over these years is clearly evident. For men aged over 50, the activity rate fell from 65.5 per cent in 1971 to

43.8 per cent in 1998, representing the loss of over 600, 000 jobs for this age group (Campbell, 1999). The picture for women aged over 50 is less apparent: the activity rate of 27.3 per cent in 1971 remains unchanged in 1998. This unchanged figure however appears to reflect a combination of underlying trends. In recent decades each generation of female workers has enjoyed a higher activity rate than its predecessors, as found in increased activity rates for successive cohorts of female workers (Trinder, Hulme and McCarthy, 1992). In line with this finding, it can be seen from Table 2 that by 1998 the economic activity rate for all women in the UK had increased to 43.0 per cent from 32.9 per cent in 1971. Evidence suggests however that notwithstanding such increases, the labour force participation rate for women continues to decline steeply in the fifteen years preceding their state retirement age (Ginn and Arber, 1995). If they had they enjoyed the same increase in employment as younger women between 1971 and 1998, over 200,000 more women aged over 50 would now be in work (Campbell, 1999). The unchanged participation rate of 27.3 per cent over this period consequently appears to reflect both an increased activity rate for female workers overall and a declining activity rate for older female workers similar to that seen for older male workers.

Over the last 30 years then, the numbers of older workers participating in the labour force have decreased relative both to numbers employed previously and to their younger counterparts. The shift towards an older population and reduced participation in employment for older workers is not restricted to the United Kingdom, similar patterns have been found in all Western countries (ILO, 1975; 1999). This has led to ever-increasing attention at a national and international level

to the reasons for such changes, their implications for labour force participation, and the likely wider effects for society.

### ***Discrimination against older workers***

The figures above are consistent with the findings of many studies (e.g. Campbell, 1999; Phillipson, 1998a) which also suggest that older workers as a group are increasingly absent from the workplace. Various explanations have been proposed for this reduction in the number of older workers in employment, included among them the choice of greater numbers of people to retire early from employment, the increased availability of occupational pensions and a shift in labour demand (Campbell, 1999). Most commonly though, the increasing marginalisation of older workers is regarded as the outcome, at least in part, of employment practices adopted by employers which favour the recruitment and retention of younger rather than older workers (e.g. Laczko and Phillipson, 1991; Taylor and Walker, 1997).

Discrimination in employment on the basis of age is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, age discrimination in some forms appears to have been present for much of the 20th century. Stearns (1975), in a study of industrialisation between 1890 and 1919, reports that at that time many workers in the British metal industry felt judged by their employers to be 'too old at forty', their skills superseded by the industrial changes then taking place. A comprehensive review of work practices conducted by Fogarty (1975) documented the problems experienced by middle aged applicants in relation to professional and managerial jobs, problems which had 'probably

increased from the 1950s to the early 1970s' (*ibid.*: 83). By the 1960s and 1970s, the difficulties experienced by older workers in obtaining employment or even in being re-engaged in previous employment had become clear in relation to other industries such as mining (Department of Employment, 1970) and car production (Mackay, 1973). Since then, the marginalisation of older workers has accelerated (e.g. Bytheway, 1986; Phillipson, 1998b) as reflected in the figures discussed above.

### ***Measures to address age discrimination***

The perceived absence of older workers from the workplace as a result of discriminatory employment practices has in recent years become the focus of ever-increasing attention from writers and policy makers alike. Many researchers (e.g. Laczko and Phillipson, 1991; Taylor and Walker, 1995) have sought to highlight the difficulties faced by older workers in obtaining and retaining employment and have argued for action to improve their prospects. Similarly policy makers across the European Union ( e.g. Larsson, 1999) and elsewhere have placed the issue of age discrimination high on the political agenda in seeking to effect change in employment practices on a national and trans-national scale.

Despite this increasing awareness of and attention given to age discrimination in recent years, evidence such as that discussed above suggests that the employment prospects for older workers have improved little over this period. That is not to say however that matters have simply stood still. On the contrary, the majority of Western governments have made some intervention in their national employment

markets, aimed at bringing about change in factors commonly regarded as responsible for age discrimination. Such interventions typically take the form either of legislation intended to outlaw some or all aspects of discriminatory practice used by employers (e.g. in France, United States), or attempts to persuade employers voluntarily to alter their views of and practices towards older workers (e.g. in the United Kingdom). Neither approach has to date had much success in altering the situation faced by older workers, and age discrimination continues to feature prominently on the research and political agendas (e.g. DfEE, 2000; Lyon and Pollard, 1997; Walker, 1998). Reasons for this apparent lack of success will be considered in the chapters to come. Here, an examination of these interventions is both useful and necessary for a greater understanding of the present social context within which the employment practices which disadvantage older workers occur.

### ***Anti-discrimination legislation***

Unlike the UK, many Western countries, including Austria, France, Germany and Spain, have in recent times introduced legislation aimed at prohibiting at least some aspects of age discrimination. These measures range in scope from those which simply outlaw the use of age limits in job advertisements (used in France) to others which address age discrimination more widely (used in the United States). The most developed and comprehensive example of legislation aimed specifically at preventing age discrimination in the workplace was the passing in the United States of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). Introduced in 1967, the ADEA was designed to promote and encourage the hiring and retaining of older

workers on the basis of ability rather than age and thus to prohibit age discrimination in the workplace. Although originally limited in its scope to the protection of workers aged 40 to 65 employed in private industry, the protection offered by the ADEA has since been extended in 1974, 1978 and 1986 and now covers all employees of federal, state and local governments as well as those of private businesses employing 20 or more people. While the lower age limit for protection remains 40, there is now no upper age limit except for restricted categories of employment such as fire-fighters and law enforcement officials to whom an amended upper limit of 70 applies. Employees falling within the scope of the ADEA are protected against all age discrimination, including discrimination in favour of others within the protected group: for example, an employer cannot solely on the basis of age favour a 45 year old against a 60 year old. Further, the ADEA specifically prohibits a number of employment practices, including discharge (i.e. dismissal), refusal to hire or promote, and constructive discharge on the grounds of an individual's age. It is thus intended and designed to be a comprehensive attempt to prohibit age discrimination in the workplace and promote employment on the basis of ability and not age (Bessey and Ananda, 1991).

The extent to which the ADEA succeeds in its aims however is a matter of debate. Bessey and Ananda (1991) argue that the potential benefits of the Act for older workers have been diluted by a number of factors. Of these, the most significant in practice is that the remedies available under the ADEA in respect of discrimination do not allow groups of disadvantaged older workers to raise joint complaints ('class actions') against an employer. It is thus left to older workers to seek redress for

discrimination individually at potentially high expense. Additionally, it has proved extremely difficult in law for a plaintiff to establish age discrimination in any particular case, due to the various elements which must be proved, the statutory defences available to any employer (e.g. articulation of a non-discriminatory reason for the action), and the common reluctance of the US courts to accept statistical evidence in support of claims. Finally, according to Bessey and Ananda (1991), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the administrative agency responsible for overseeing the operation of the ADEA, has been ineffective in processing complaints made under the ADEA. Understaffing of the EEOC and the lack of availability of class actions as a remedy have allowed the statute of limitations to run out in many potential discrimination complaints leading to these being time-barred from consideration.

Similar difficulties for plaintiffs are noted by Rutherglen (1995), who argues that many potential claimants are unable to pursue their rights due to lack of financial and other resources. As a result, the majority of claims made under the ADEA have been brought by white males discharged from high-status jobs. Rutherglen also observes that most claims under the Act have been brought in respect of dismissal rather than non-employment. The ADEA consequently seems to have had little impact on the prospects of obtaining employment for older applicants.

The legislation moreover appears to have had various unintended consequences for older workers and their employment prospects. Firstly, in response to the expanding scope of the legislation, a number of employers have adopted the practice of



encouraging or requiring departing employees to sign waivers of their employment rights under the ADEA in exchange for payment of severance benefits. The widespread use of such practice and consequent lack of legal recourse for many older employees has in practice reduced the need for employers to comply with the anti-discrimination measures contained in the Act (Kneisel and Silver, 1998a). Although the US Congress has sought to address such practices, the anti-avoidance provisions contained in the Older Workers Benefit Protection Act 1990 consist only of the setting out of minimum requirements for any waivers granted. The practice of obtaining waivers from departing employees therefore continues, to the detriment of older workers (Harper, 1993; Kandel, 1996; Kneisel and Silver, 1998b).

Secondly, various writers (e.g. Blumrosen, Blumrosen, Carmignani and Daly, 1998; Minda, 1997) suggest that in the last decade many jobs for older workers have disappeared through corporate 'downsizing', where employers have strategically reduced their workforces in order to improve costs to income ratios. Older workers, who are viewed by employers as more expensive to employ and less productive than other workers, appear to have borne the brunt of these corporate strategies. Disproportionate losses of older workers from organisations following downsizing have though survived attacks from plaintiffs under the ADEA when presented as part of general cost-cutting measures (Minda, 1997).

A third consequence of the legislation is the increased incidence of discharging older workers on the basis of criteria other than age. While the ADEA outlaws age discrimination, it continues to allow differentiation between employees or job

applicants based on 'reasonable factors other than age' (ADEA, section 4(f)). This, Worsley (1996) argues, has led to the widespread practice of companies hiring consultants in 'assessment processes', with a remit to produce grounds for non-employment and discharge other than those prohibited by anti-discrimination legislation. The use of alternative criteria (such as physical fitness for particular jobs) which favour younger workers in selection procedures has indeed been advocated by many employment lawyers and other writers (e.g. Mannino and Walsh, 1982; Miller, Kaspin and Schuster, 1990). One such recommendation is given by Arthur, Fuentes and Doverspike (1990: 12):

'a better alternative (to age) for employment decisions would be based on the identification and measurement of the attributes that best predict job performance. Even though age decrements may exist on the attributes used to predict job performance, age should not be used as a proxy variable for a valid test. Using valid tests . . . would also have a better chance of passing the scrutiny of the courts.'

Borgatta (1991) similarly argues that apparent correlates of age, such as 'physical attributes', 'ingrained work habits' or other factors which lead employers to favour the employment of younger people over older people may form the basis of rational and legal selection procedures. On this argument, where factors can be shown to be salient to the employment, it is quite rational for employers to discriminate against older workers as a group. While treating individuals differently carries attendant risks, the disparate treatment of older workers as a group may be shown to have a quasi-objective basis and may be accepted by the courts as resulting from factors other than age.

The ADEA then does not appear to have been an unqualified success in improving the employment prospects for older workers. Although the Act bestows upon individuals comprehensive rights to fair treatment and non-discrimination in employment, the difficulties encountered in practice in enforcing these rights have made their benefit more doubtful. Additionally, new corporate strategies of obtaining waivers of rights, downsizing and the use of apparent correlates of age in employment practices have continued to exclude older workers as a group from the workplace. While it has become more difficult for American employers to discriminate openly on the basis of age alone, it would seem that discrimination against older workers persists in modified forms.

Elsewhere the effectiveness of anti-discrimination legislation has also been brought into question. In several countries where anti-discrimination legislation has been introduced (e.g. Canada, France, Spain), economic activity rates for the over 50s remain similar to those found prior to the introduction of legislation. It is commonly agreed that the introduction of statutory measures is useful in raising public awareness of the issue of age discrimination: its effectiveness in reducing the incidence of discrimination however remains questionable.

### ***The UK Government approach and the Code of Practice***

At present, there exists in the United Kingdom no legislation which addresses the issue of age discrimination. Indeed, the difficulties experienced in relation to the ADEA in the United States and the lack of tangible success of legislation elsewhere

are frequently cited as reasons for not introducing similar measures in the UK (see e.g. *Hansard*, 30 March 1999: vol. 329, c. 955). Even proponents of a statutory approach to tackling age discrimination have argued that legislation in the UK should be enacted in a form different from the American provisions (Laczko and Phillipson, 1990). The lack of statutory measures in this country has however not arisen for the want of trying. Over the 16 year period from 1983 to 1999, a total of 10 private members' bills and proposed amendments to Government bills were introduced by backbenchers in the House of Commons. The intended scope of these measures ranged from those aimed specifically at the prohibition of age limits in job advertisements to those seeking to outlaw age discrimination more generally. Each bill or amendment has fallen at the first Parliamentary hurdle due to lack of available time, lack of government support or both. The UK Government, regardless of political complexion, has consistently opposed the introduction of legislation on this issue.

One reason for such opposition was that, until the late 1980s, age discrimination in the UK was not viewed by policy-makers as a particular issue for concern. The increasing trend for older workers to leave the workforce was seen mainly as an outcome of economic market forces, one which had potential benefits in opening up jobs for younger workers and bringing down official rates of unemployment (Kohli and Rein, 1991). Towards the end of that decade however, projections of an ageing population and its potential dependency on a predominantly younger workforce shifted the focus from the opportunities available to the young onto ways of retaining older workers in employment. The shift in emphasis is well summed up in

the first paragraph of a 1989 House of Commons Employment Select Committee Report:

'When we began to plan the inquiry, interest still centred on the development of schemes to ease older workers into early retirement. By the time we had finished taking our evidence there had been a dramatic shift of emphasis and there was growing discussion of ways in which older people could be persuaded to stay at work in order to offset the impending shortage of young workers. The pendulum has rarely swung so swiftly.'

(House of Commons, 1989 para 1)

Following the report, the Government at the time in 1992/3 launched a campaign intended to persuade employers of the benefits of employing and retaining older workers and to convince older workers themselves of the skills they had to offer to employers. This campaign was accompanied by the setting up of an Advisory Group on Older Workers and led to the subsequent publication of two booklets, 'Getting On' published in 1994 and 'Too Old . . . who says' published in January 1995. The first of these was targeted at employers, outlining the business benefits of abandoning discriminatory practices, while the second provided advice and information for older jobseekers. These voluntary measures, the campaign and publication of two booklets, marked the extent of the Government's attempts to address age discrimination in the workplace.

The Labour Party, when in opposition, consistently rejected such a voluntarist approach. In 1996, the then Shadow Employment Minister set out the Labour Party's position as follows:

'The Labour Party's position is quite clear. This Conservative Government may not accept my Hon. Friend's Bill, but an incoming Labour Government will introduce comprehensive legislation to make age discrimination in employment illegal.'

(*Hansard*, 9 February 1996: vol. 271, c.618)

In office however, the present Government have pursued a course similar to their predecessors, opposing the introduction of legislation and continuing to promote voluntary measures to address age discrimination. A consultation paper issued in 1998, 'Action on Age' (DfEE, 1998), sought views from employers, trades unions, organisations representing older people and individuals on ways of eliminating age discrimination in employment. Following responses to the consultation paper, on 14th June 1999 the Government published a voluntary code of practice (DfEE, 1999) setting out a framework of measures intended to represent fair and non-discriminatory employment practice. In terms of the code, employers are particularly encouraged to apply to age discrimination two principles previously well-established in employment practice, those of equal opportunities and of diversity in employment.

### *Equal opportunities in employment*

The principle of equality of opportunity in employment first came to prominence in this country in the mid 1970s. Introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Race Relations Act 1976 mark the starting point of Government attempts to address segregation in the workplace<sup>2</sup>. Introduced to tackle discrimination on the grounds of gender or race respectively, both statutes contained a range of provisions

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<sup>2</sup> The Equal Pay Act although passed in 1970 did not come into force until 1975. Many writers argue that as the Act aimed only to equalise rates of pay it did not constitute an anti-discrimination measure (see e.g. Forbes, 1989; Lockwood and Knowles, 1984).

aimed at prohibiting not just direct discrimination but also indirect discrimination as widely defined. More than this however, the Acts were intended to initiate a change in cultural attitudes. For, in addition to the direct provisions introduced, each piece of legislation provided for the setting up of a commission to monitor its implementation and effects. The bodies introduced, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), were charged with the responsibility of supervising the working of the legislation, giving advice to employers and disseminating relevant information and publications to the wider population.

In pursuing the proactive roles given to them, each Commission subsequently issued a Code of Practice (CRE, 1983; EOC, 1985) encouraging employers to implement the spirit as well as the letter of the legislation. Thus the Codes of Practice refer not only to the 'elimination of discrimination' but also to the 'promotion of equality of opportunity'. Whereas the legislative provisions had left the question of identifying and responding to discrimination in the workplace to individuals affected, the Codes of Practice encouraged employers to promote a culture of fairness within their organisations and to review their employment practices to this effect even in the absence of any complaint of discrimination.

For most employers who implemented the Codes of Practice, a review of previous employment procedures led to the introduction of a written equal opportunities policy to operate within the organisation. Initially such equal opportunities policies were limited in scope to non-discrimination on the basis of sex and race, the specific

topics of the legislation, or offered a statement of aims in highly generalised terms. Further, the introduction of such policies, in written form, was initially limited mainly to certain sectors of the economy, primarily local government (Nanton, 1995), higher education institutions (Winch and Sharp, 1994) and organisations with union representation (Ball, 1990). During the course of the 1980s however the range of written equal opportunities policies increased both in prevalence and scope. In a 1984 survey of personnel managers (Mackay and Torrington, 1986), 60 per cent of respondents stated that their organisations had equal opportunities policies in operation. Around the same time the scope of many policies widened to include specific reference to factors other than sex and race. Following the issue of the two Codes of Practice above, the Institute of Personnel Management (1986) issued its own equal opportunities code advising its members to avoid discrimination on grounds of sex, race, disability or age and thus to recruit and promote employees from the widest available reservoir of talent. Since then, it has become commonplace to see statements in job advertisements and elsewhere that 'X is an equal opportunities employer', 'Y is committed to equal opportunities' or similar claims. From its initial beginnings in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of equal opportunities in employment has now attained a high level of usage among employers, statutory bodies and the UK Government alike.

Over the last 20 years the principle of equal opportunities in employment has become increasingly established as part of employment practice. Its application to age discrimination during that period has been somewhat less apparent. Evidence suggests that there is some way to go before equal opportunities for older workers



are widely incorporated into employment policies. Notwithstanding the increased introduction of written policies in recent years throughout all sectors of the UK economy, relatively few of these include age in their detailed provisions. In a study carried out shortly before the publication of the voluntary code of practice, only 40 per cent of the 3000 organisations surveyed were found to have in place written equal opportunities policies which made specific mention of age (Cully, O'Reilly, Millward, Forth, Woodland, Dix and Bryson, 1998). One thrust of the voluntary approach of the Government in the voluntary Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999: 2) accordingly is that 'equal opportunities policies should incorporate age as part of good practice', giving discrimination on grounds of age attention similar to that previously given to discrimination on other grounds.

Having considered the background to equal opportunities, the first principle promoted to address age discrimination, I now turn to the second principle embodied in the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999), that of diversity in employment.

### *The management of diversity in employment*

'To maintain a competitive edge, organisations need to employ an age diverse workforce which reflects the demands of its changing community and potential markets.'

(DfEE, 1999: 4)

While the principle of equal opportunities has its origins in measures introduced previously to address other forms of discrimination in the workplace, the notion of diversity in employment has a less clearly documented and discernible history in the

United Kingdom. One of its earliest appearances in this country was in a 1988 article setting out ten measures typically found in employers' programmes for 'valuing diversity' (Copeland, 1988). As with many aspects of employment practice though, the principle of diversity in employment extends far beyond this country and it should come as no surprise that conceptions of diversity in employment and its management received their initial impetus from the United States (e.g. Thomas, 1986). Since that time, it has been taken up on a global scale (see e.g. D'Netto and Sohal, 1999; Humphries and Grice, 1995). The management of a diverse workforce now dominates the agenda of human resources management (e.g. Shapiro, 2000; Woodhams and Danieli, 2000) and is seen by employers themselves as one of the most important, if not the most important, challenges facing organisations in the 21st century (Ivancevich and Gilbert, 2000; McMahan, Bell and Virick, 1998; Mathews, 1998).

In broad terms, diversity in employment comprises the recruitment, retention, promotion and rewarding of a heterogeneous mix of individuals within an organisation. Each individual is thought to bring a unique combination of abilities, characteristics and qualities reflecting his or her background, experiences, skills and so on. The aim of managing diversity consequently becomes one of combining the different talents and contributions of disparate employees for the overall benefit of individual workers and the employer:

'Differences among employees create a more diversified workforce, with a wide range of perspectives. Managing diversity means capturing the richness of these differences and harnessing them for the betterment of employees and the organisation.'

(Bartz, Hillman, Lehrer and Mayhugh, 1990: 321-2)

The emphasis of the notion of diversity on the differences between employees sits well with the focus on the individual which is central to the enterprise of human resources management (Legge, 1995) and a core element of present employment practices (Hollway, 1991). Additionally, differences between employees are regarded as valuable to an employer, a useful human resource in the pursuit of profit. These emphases, firstly on the individual employee, and secondly on the aim of producing benefits for the organisation thus make the notion of diversity in employment more attractive to employers than other employment initiatives such as equal opportunities (Perloff and Bryant, 2000).

In contrast to its position on equal opportunities, in relation to diversity in employment the Government appears to be following rather than leading the practices of employers. No mention was made, in previous anti-discrimination measures, of the need to recruit a workforce diverse in respect of race or gender. The introduction of the concept of diversity in relation to age in the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999) marks its first use by the Government as a means of addressing segregation in the workplace. Indeed, compared with a complete absence from previous anti-discrimination measures, the notion of diversity in employment has now arrived centre stage, as is evident in the title of the Code of Practice (Age Diversity in Employment) (DfEE, 1999).

## ***Further developments***

These twin prongs of equal opportunities and age diversity in employment have come to form the cornerstones of the UK Government's approach to tackling age discrimination in employment. Although the 1992/3 campaign and publications have been superseded, the approach remains one of voluntary measures. Legislative intervention in some form however is not far off. In October 2000, the European Union Council agreed a directive requiring member states to introduce by 2006 legislation prohibiting discrimination in the workplace on a number of grounds. Included in such grounds are religion, disability, sexual orientation and age. The standards set for such legislation though are minimal, allowing differences in treatment on grounds of age to remain where these can be justified on the basis of employment policy, the labour market or professional training and experience. It remains to be seen therefore to what extent the UK Government will legislate in respect of age discrimination in implementing the directive.

The prospects for the introduction of comprehensive measures to address age discrimination are not promising. Previous indications from the UK Government are that comprehensive legislation will only be introduced if an evaluation of the Code of Practice shows it to have been ineffective in addressing discrimination (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000). Interim evaluation of the operation of the Code of Practice (DfEE, 2000) suggests there has been little change in company policies following the introduction of the Code. The Equal Opportunities Minister Margaret Hodge has consequently stated that the Government will re-assess the need

for legislation in October 2001 (Employers Forum on Age, 2000b). However, reported outcomes of other government initiatives set up to examine and report on aspects of ageing, including the inclusion of older people in employment, suggest that measures introduced may turn out to be somewhat half-hearted. In November 1999, the Foresight Ageing Population Panel was set up to raise awareness about population ageing and its potential impact on markets and economic and social structures. Its report published in December 2000 is still to meet with any substantive Government response. Around the same time, 17 January 2001, the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology published its first report on the EQUAL (Extend Quality Life) initiative, launched in July 1995 with the aim of using ‘the combined resources, expertise and capacity for innovation of the science and engineering base to extend the active period of people’s lives’ (DTI, 1995). Reviewing the operation of the EQUAL initiative, the Select Committee comments on the lack of commitment, leadership and funding given to the programme in reaching a telling conclusion:

‘The Government must face up to the fact that EQUAL, as established, has not worked . . . Unless EQUAL can be relaunched, properly funded and managed with enthusiasm, it should be abandoned.’

House of Commons (2001, para. 74)

The commitment of the Government to improving the prospects for older people generally and older workers in particular thus remains to be demonstrated. Nonetheless, the approach adopted and the measures promoted in the Code of Practice form part of the current employment context in the United Kingdom within which the exclusion of older workers takes place.

The argument here however is not that the introduction of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation would be more effective than the present approach: experience of the operation of the ADEA in the United States suggests otherwise. Rather, the present argument is that the success of any intervention, whether statutory or voluntary, requires a demonstrable commitment to understanding the operation and maintenance of discrimination against older workers as social practice. Present policy has been informed by the consultation process carried out prior to the introduction of the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999). Throughout this process however, little attention was given to consultation with those most affected by current practices, namely older workers and jobseekers. In this, the consultation process mirrors previous research into age discrimination from which the accounts and views of older workers are also conspicuously absent.

In Chapter Two, I turn to a review of research into age discrimination in employment and consider what previous work within several strands of research can contribute to such an understanding. The limitations of each approach are discussed. My argument will be that a fuller understanding of age discrimination necessarily requires obtaining and examining the views of those who are most affected. A social constructionist approach to this issue, which examines the views of both jobseekers and employers of relevant matters, can provide a better understanding of age discrimination in an ever-changing employment context than that offered by previous writers.

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## Chapter two

### Review of previous research

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#### *Introduction*

As awareness of age discrimination in employment has increased in recent times, so too has the relevant research literature. In this Chapter, I will examine work within the two most influential approaches to this topic and explore what each can contribute to an understanding of age discrimination as a social issue. The first approach considered is that dominant within traditional social psychology. For much of psychology, discrimination on the grounds of age has long been regarded as an example of the more general phenomenon of prejudice. As such, it is viewed as amenable to investigation in the same ways as other forms of prejudice, for instance sexism or racism. Discrimination faced by older workers consequently is explained as the result of the views held by employers towards older workers and jobseekers, with the emphasis on individual beliefs and individual action.

The second approach which is considered derives from other disciplines, most notably sociology and social policy, within which age discrimination has received attention even greater than that from psychology (Harper, 2000). Within this second approach, older workers are regarded as a *social group* who are disadvantaged vis-à-vis others in our society rather than as *individuals*. Age discrimination is explained primarily as structural, the manifestation of social structures which privilege some social groups over others. Some writers acknowledge that the individual aspects of age discrimination and the links between the individual and the social are not always explicit. Nevertheless it is the structural elements of discrimination which are given the greater emphasis.

This division of research into two broad categories is at least to some extent artificial, given the different shades of argument which run through each of them and the positions adopted by different writers. Nonetheless, the primary emphases of the two approaches are sufficiently distinct to make this framework useful in examining the main arguments.

In addition to considering these two strands of research, in the later part of the Chapter two other sets of studies are reviewed. The first of these (Bodily, 1991; 1994) provides a view of age rather different to either of the two main approaches, in arguing that age can more usefully be viewed as a discursive resource than as individual or structural in origin. In the second set of studies, conducted by the Couplands and their colleagues, the characteristics of older people in general are viewed as negotiated within everyday social interaction and consequently are more



flexible than would be suggested by either of the two main approaches. The review of these sets of studies leads on to the development of the aims of the present study and the approach adopted. I will start though by considering the first of the two main perspectives outlined above, the explanation of age discrimination in employment as individual prejudice.

### ***Age discrimination as individual prejudice***

In considering studies focusing on individual processes causing ageism and age discrimination, an appropriate starting point is the work of the American psychiatrist Robert Butler (Butler, 1969; Butler and Lewis, 1973). The adoption of the term 'ageism' is widely ascribed to Butler, who is credited with having placed ageism on the agenda for discussion. Butler and Lewis (1973: ix) offer the following definition of ageism:

'Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender. Old people are categorised as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills . . . Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves, thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings.'

This definition although much criticised on the grounds of its emphasis on individual processes (see e.g. Cole, 1992; Kalish, 1979; Schonfield, 1982) remains in wide circulation and appears in the same form in Butler's contribution to *The Encyclopaedia of Aging* (Maddox, 1987). In proposing this definition, Butler succeeded in drawing together strands of thought from work previously carried out

within several different disciplines, much of which had concentrated on individual views of older people. The suggestion that age discrimination is analogous to other forms of prejudice is also clear in the comparison with racism and sexism. Butler subsequently elaborated upon his position to argue that not only individual prejudice but also discriminatory practices and institutional policies contribute to ageism (Butler, 1980). Nevertheless it was his initial emphasis on individual prejudice which continued to receive the greatest attention. Not only did this reflect findings from earlier studies but also it pointed the way for a line of research which continues to this day.

In keeping with the above definition of ageism in general, age discrimination in employment comes to be regarded as one particular instance of the more general phenomenon of prejudice. Discrimination against older workers is thus treated as the outcome of the negative views held towards and stereotyping of older workers by employers. Research accordingly has focused either on the content of the views held by employers, or on the processes by which they come to operate against older workers. These two lines of inquiry, the views of older workers held by employers and the processes of categorisation and stereotyping will now be considered in turn.

### *Attitudes of employers*

In studies of the views held by employers towards older workers, the method of investigation most commonly used is the attitude survey. Attitudes are conceptualised as stable mental representations which endure over time. In terms of

the traditional view, these can be elicited by presenting participants with a stimulus or 'attitudinal object' towards which they are required to express a view. Often their responses are obtained by means of a fixed-point scale. Thus, for example, participants may be presented with a description such as 'non-managerial workers aged over 40' and required to respond on a five-point scale as to how hard such people work when compared with 'younger workers' (Warr and Pennington, 1993). In other cases, where no response scale has been deployed, more open-ended types of response have been obtained from the participants and rated subsequently by the researchers (e.g. Heron and Chown, 1961). The underlying rationale though remains the same: the views expressed by the participants represent their internal attitudes towards the attitudinal object provided by the researcher.

Findings from studies employing such methods have been generally ambivalent. Various early studies found that older workers tended to be viewed as more experienced and more reliable than younger workers but also less adaptable and less active (see e.g. Kirchner and Dunnette, 1954; Tuckman and Lorge, 1952). One such example is a study carried out by Heron and Chown (1961). Managers and foremen in twenty different companies were asked the question: 'How does men's work performance alter with age?' The responses obtained were subsequently coded by the researchers either as positive or negative. Fifty-six per cent of responses were classed as positive towards older workers, referring to them as having greater experience than younger workers, producing better quality of work or similar. Forty-four per cent of responses were classed as negative, usually referring to older people as working more slowly than younger workers. The findings obtained then from this

and other early studies do not support the view that the views held towards older workers are predominantly negative.

One study which did find negative views expressed towards older jobseekers was that carried out by Gibson, Zerbe and Franken (1992). In their study, responses were obtained from 651 employers to the question: 'What is the major reason why the mature unemployed so often have difficulty finding work?' The responses obtained were subsequently categorised by three raters. From the categorisation, there emerged five major reasons for the failure of the mature unemployed to find work, as follows:

- '1) the older job hunter<sup>3</sup> is perceived as being unqualified to perform the duties associated with contemporary employment;
- 2) the older job hunter is perceived as being more expensive to employ;
- 3) the older job hunter is perceived as being difficult to integrate into the corporate culture;
- 4) the older job hunter is perceived as being the victim of discrimination, and
- 5) the older job hunter is perceived as lacking appropriate job-search skills'

*(ibid.: 166).*

While most of these reasons appear unfavourable to the mature unemployed, the question put to the participants is of particular note. Unlike previous studies, the employers here were required to comment on the prevailing employment situation rather than to express their own views of older job hunters as people.

The earlier pattern has re-emerged in more recent research (e.g. Metcalf and Thomson, 1990; Taylor and Walker, 1993). For instance, in a study carried out by Warr and Pennington (1993), all employees in a number of workplaces were

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<sup>3</sup> 'Job hunter' is the term used by Gibson, Zerbe and Franken (1992) rather than 'jobseeker' which is more familiar in this country.

presented with seventeen statements relevant to employees in general. Participants were required to respond, on a five point scale ranging from 'much less so than younger workers' to 'much more so than younger workers', how applicable each statement was to 'non-managerial workers over the age of 40'. Non-managerial employees over the age of 40 were attributed with qualities such as having more experience, being more reliable and being more interpersonally skilled than younger employees. On the other hand, compared to younger employees, such employees were also viewed as adapting less well to change, learning less quickly and being less able to grasp new ideas. Again the responses obtained in the study attributed to older workers both positive and negative characteristics.

A recent survey by Austin Knight Research (1996) asked over 2000 people of all ages, employed by a range of organisations, for their views of older employees. A similar pattern emerged. The majority of respondents viewed older workers as more loyal and stable than younger workers and stated that employment decisions should be based on ability rather than age. Younger respondents however were more than twice as likely as those over 40 to view older workers as unable to acquire new skills and as more likely to take time off work than themselves.

Notwithstanding such findings, other researchers simply assume that the attitudes held by employers towards older workers must be negative for age discrimination to occur at all. Worsley (1996), for example, sets out his position clearly in the title of his book 'Age and Employment: Why employers should think again about older workers'. In this book, as the title suggests, Worsley seeks to convince employers

who do not take on older employees that it would bring benefits to their organisations to employ some older workers within their workforce. It is simply assumed that older workers are different from younger workers although little evidence is given in support of any of the claims, particularly the suggestion that employers view older workers as different from younger workers.

The argument then that employers' discriminatory actions against older workers result from the negative attitudes held, although assumed by Worsley (1996) and others, is found wanting even in its own terms. Studies such as those considered above, which have examined the views of employers and others, have found a combination of positive and negative views. While certain responses indicate negative views of older workers, such as lack of adaptability and inability to learn new skills, others such as reliability and interpersonal skills would appear to be positive attributes for any potential employee. Where predominantly negative views of older workers have been expressed, as in the study by Gibson, Zerbe and Franken (1992), these have been elicited in response to more general questions about employment.

Moreover, the explanation of age discrimination as the result of the negative attitudes of employers towards older workers is less than useful on other grounds: one reason for this is the notion of attitudes itself.

### *Problems with the concept of attitudes*

Within traditional psychological research, attitudes are considered to be stable, underlying positions held towards people or objects, which lead to behaviour consistent with the attitude. Although the notion of attitude has been criticised on many grounds, not least on account of the apparently weak relationship between attitudes as measured and behaviour (e.g. LaPiere 1934; Wicker, 1971), I will focus here on the problems encountered with the concept of attitudes in relation to the studies considered this far.

The first difficulty encountered with attitudes as a useful explanation in this context is the idea of an attitude as an underlying, stable mental position. As seen from the findings of the studies above, the views expressed about older workers appear at least to some extent to be mutually contradictory, a combination of very negative points and very positive ones. It is difficult to envisage how these could easily be combined into one coherent attitude. Even assuming that this were possible however, another difficulty arises in relation to the idea of an attitude as being consistent and stable.

In 1988, Kite and Johnson carried out a meta-analysis of 43 previous studies which had compared attitudes towards older people with attitudes towards younger people. From their analysis, they found that attitudes towards the elderly were overall more negative than attitudes towards younger people but that the effect sizes in the individual studies varied considerably both in magnitude and direction. In eleven of

the studies reviewed the differences were found to be in the direction of the older people, that is attitudes towards older people were more favourable than attitudes towards younger people. Differences in evaluations given by participants were found to be affected by various factors, including aspects of the experimental designs used in the studies. The differences in attitudes expressed towards older and younger people were smaller when (a) measures of personality traits were used instead of measures of competence, (b) a greater number of dependent measures were included in the effect size, (c) specific information was given about a target person compared to a general term such as elderly person, or (d) a between-subjects design rather than a within-subjects design was used. Kite and Johnson concluded that age, in itself, seemed to be less important than other types of information in determining attitudes towards the elderly. These findings suggest that the expression of views towards the elderly can vary greatly according to the context in which they are sought and the experimental design used to obtain them.

A further difficulty for the studies reviewed above and others is the assumption that terms such as 'older workers' simply provide descriptions of people towards whom participants can express their views. Phrases such as 'older workers', 'the mature unemployed', 'older job hunters' have been used, firstly almost interchangeably, and secondly as descriptions which are considered essentially unproblematic. Other research suggests that the terms used are neither interchangeable nor neutral descriptions. Barbato and Feezel (1987) asked 162 participants in three age groups (17-44, 45-64 and 65+) to rate the connotative meanings of ten common descriptions of an older person. Terms such as 'mature American', 'senior citizen' and 'retired



person' were evaluated positively by all age groups on the scales 'active', 'strong', 'good', 'progressive' and 'happy'. Other terms such as 'aged', 'elderly' and nouns using 'old' (e.g. 'old person') were rated negatively, again by all age groups. They concluded that the language used in the terms referring to older people influenced the views expressed towards them. This suggests that different age-related terms are by no means interchangeable and that they do more than simply describe certain people within society.

The argument that age discrimination against older workers stems from the negative attitudes held towards them by employers is thus found lacking in several respects. Firstly, numerous studies have found expressions of both positive and negative views, not the predominantly negative expressions which would be predicted. Secondly, as Kite and Johnson (1988) found, the attitudes expressed by employers vary considerably according to the context and design used to obtain them. Finally, the stimuli used as attitudinal objects, to which participants are required to respond, also give rise to variation in the views expressed and are rather more than neutral descriptors of particular people. All of these sources of variation cast doubt on the usefulness of attitudes. In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that age discrimination in employment results from employers' negative attitudes towards older workers.

One shortcoming of attitude theory then is that investigation of the content of employers' views suggests that these are not as negative as would be expected. Other writers have argued that such views although negative do not operate at a

fully aware or conscious level. While prejudice remains seen essentially as individual action, interest is focused not on the content of the views but instead on the processes by which they come to be applied by individuals, namely the processes of categorisation and stereotyping.

### *Stereotyping / categorisation*

As regards age discrimination, research into the processes and effects of stereotyping has generally come from the perspective of social cognition. Within this approach, the social environment like the physical environment is regarded as a vast array of perceptual stimuli which is too complex for an individual to attend to in its entirety, especially when other cognitive demands are present. To make sense of this environment and act upon it, the individual requires to simplify the context by making use of cognitive processes of categorisation which have developed for precisely this purpose (e.g. Fiske and Neuberg, 1990; Hamilton, 1979). The categories applied to the social environment bring with them information relating to members of these categories, information which is widely shared within our culture and has been previously stored in the memory of the individual. Application of such stored knowledge on the basis of category membership constitutes stereotyping. These processes of categorisation and stereotyping reduce the cognitive load on the individual by removing the requirement for a response specific to the stimulus encountered. Thus, in using stereotypes, the individual is viewed as a cognitive miser, either:

'a lazy slob who is prone to stereotype whenever the going gets tough, cognitively speaking . . . [or] someone who stereotypes not as a way of simply avoiding cognitive work, but rather as a means to free up resources for use in other tasks.'

Macrae, Milne and Bodenhausen (1994: 38)

An encounter therefore with a particular person will activate the process of categorisation to a relevant social group and the application of information previously known about that group to the target individual. Activation of the stereotype, will consequently affect judgement of and behaviour towards the person encountered (Hamilton, Sherman and Ruvolo, 1990; Hilton and von Hippel, 1996) leading to prejudice against that person should the information stored be negative. Some social categories, on this view, are so basic that an encounter with a member of the category will activate automatically the relevant stereotype (Banaji and Hardin, 1996). Thus, in the case of an employer, an encounter with an older worker will trigger negative stereotypical views held towards older workers as a group and lead to prejudice in both judgement and behaviour.

Experimental evidence has been found to support the argument that stereotyping is an automatic process. In a highly influential study of racial stereotyping, Devine (1989) presented participants subliminally with a series of stimulus words on a computer screen. The stimuli which were used comprised words relating to the stereotype 'black Americans' (e.g. 'nigger', 'lazy', 'ghetto') and stereotype-neutral words (e.g. 'number', 'water', 'people'). These were presented either in the ratio of eighty per cent stereotype relevant to twenty per cent neutral or vice versa. Participants were also classed as high-prejudiced or low-prejudiced according to their responses on a racial prejudice scale. When participants were subsequently

required to rate the hostility of a hypothetical target individual, Devine found that all participants presented with the higher percentage (80%) of stereotype relevant words gave ratings higher than those presented with the higher percentage of neutral words. The hostility ratings given were found to be independent of the participants' own levels of prejudice. These findings were interpreted by Devine as evidence that, for all individuals, stereotyping and prejudice would inevitably follow on from category priming. Her results have been widely accepted as evidence for the automaticity of prejudice.

Similarly, evidence supporting the automaticity of ageism comes from two studies conducted by Perdue and Gurtman (1990). In the first study, participants were presented with twenty positive trait descriptors (e.g. 'intelligent', 'dependable') and twenty negative trait descriptors (e.g. 'irresponsible', 'greedy'). These were each followed by one of four possible questions relating to the adjective to which they were asked to respond. The questions used were: (1) is this a good trait to find in a person?; (2) is this a term that would describe you?; (3) is this a term that would describe an old person?, and (4) is this a term that would describe a young person?. In an unexpected task at the end of the experiment participants were asked to recall as many adjectives as possible. Significantly more negative traits were recalled when the question referred to an old rather than a young person, and significantly more positive traits were recalled when presented in relation to a young rather than an old person. In the second study, participants were required to evaluate 18 positive trait descriptors (e.g. 'helpful', 'careful') and 18 negative trait descriptors (e.g. 'stubborn', 'irritable'). Each adjective was preceded by subliminal presentation of

either the prime 'young' or the prime 'old'. For the prime 'young' participants responded faster to positive than negative descriptors and the reverse for the prime 'old'. These findings, according to Perdue and Gurtman, suggest that individuals do hold negative stereotypes of old people, and moreover that these stereotypes are activated at a level outwith conscious awareness, i.e. they are automatic.

As an explanation for prejudice, these findings are somewhat alarming. The inevitability of prejudice ensuing from the priming of a category with negative associations allows little scope for addressing prejudice. In relation specifically to older workers, the argument that an encounter with an older worker is in itself sufficient to trigger in an employer the responses of stereotyping and prejudice through automatic cognitive processing suggests that change in employment practices will be difficult if not impossible to achieve. However social cognitive explanations for prejudice run into their own difficulties to which I will now turn.

### *Problems with stereotypes*

Many criticisms of the above findings come from within the social cognitive approach itself. A number of writers have argued that the processes of categorisation stereotyping are by no means as automatic and universal as has been suggested. Firstly, various studies indicate that in a range of circumstances, the provision of more detailed information about a target person can lead to judgement of the particular individual and can overcome the general tendency to categorise and

stereotype (see Lepore and Brown, 1999 for a discussion). Neither categorisation nor stereotyping consequently is necessarily an inevitable process.

Secondly, other studies on racial stereotyping cast doubt on the relationship between categorisation, stereotyping and the seeming inevitability of prejudice. Lepore and Brown (1997) challenge the interpretation provided by Devine (1989) of the hostility ratings found in her study. It is argued that Devine, in addition to priming the category 'black American', also primed activation of the negative stereotype as a result of the negatively valenced primes (e.g. 'nigger', 'lazy') used. In contrast to Devine's study, Lepore and Brown (1997) in a similar study used as primes 'category labels and neutral associates' (e.g. 'blacks', 'Afro-Caribbean', 'ethnic'). Increased hostility ratings following category priming were found only for individuals who scored high on a prejudice scale, i.e. those who were initially classified as high-prejudiced. Although this finding seems somewhat tautologous, it does suggest that social categorisation will not inevitably lead to stereotyping and prejudice.

Applying Lepore and Brown's (1997) argument to prejudice specifically on the grounds of age gives a somewhat different view of the findings of Perdue and Gurtman (1990). As discussed above, the primes used in that study were the descriptors 'old' and 'young'. The descriptor 'old' however would appear to be rather more than a neutral term. In the study reported earlier Barbato and Feezel (1987) found that the descriptor 'old' was rated negatively by all age groups in contrast to alternatives which were evaluated positively. Arguably then, in using a

negatively valenced label as a prime, Perdue and Gurtman (1990) similarly to Devine (1989) primed for their participants not only the category itself but the negative stereotype associated with it. If a positively valenced label such as 'mature', 'senior' or 'retired' had been used, then very different results might have been obtained. Again, the choice of description is very important and cannot simply be treated as unproblematic.

Thirdly, Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson and Gaertner (1996) in a meta-analysis of previous studies cast doubt on the link between stereotypes and prejudice. While they found prejudice to be significantly associated with individual views of categories, the relationship between prejudice and shared stereotypes was found to be weak at best. Again, prejudice appeared to be an outcome of categorisation only for some individuals and not an inevitable consequence of the human cognitive system. The relationship between categorisation, stereotyping and prejudice therefore might be considerably more flexible than many writers assume (Lepore and Brown, 1997).

Fourthly, in addition to the difficulties encountered in the links between categorisation, stereotyping and prejudice, the social cognitive approach to explaining age discrimination also runs into problems similar to those found in attitude research above. The untested assumption of many stereotyping studies is that the stereotypes held towards certain categories are essentially negative. Where social cognitive researchers have examined the content of shared stereotypes, the evidence does not support the argument that views held by others towards older

workers *are* predominantly negative. Hassell and Perrewé (1995) found that, while older workers had more positive stereotypes than younger workers of older workers, even younger workers tended to hold generally favourable stereotypes of older workers. As in the attitude studies reviewed, the assumption that employers hold overwhelmingly negative views of older workers is unsupported.

Finally, a more general difficulty for the social cognitive approach to understanding prejudice lies in the validity of this whole line of research. As is noted by Macrae and Bodenhausen (2000), studies which have found evidence for the automaticity of negative stereotyping have relied almost exclusively on the presentation of category labels to the participants, rather than using other perceptual stimuli. None of these studies have looked at actual encounters between people in everyday settings. It is accordingly questionable how much any of these findings can tell us about how older people are evaluated by others in relevant everyday contexts, as opposed to the processing of verbal labels in experimental settings. The findings of Perdue and Gurtman (1990) therefore may be little more than an artefact of the experimental procedure used and of doubtful relevance to matters of everyday employment.

The explanations offered for age discrimination both by attitude theory and social cognitive research appear less than convincing. Even in their own terms, these are found wanting in several respects. Firstly, the findings of the studies reviewed do not indicate that the views expressed towards older workers are unequivocally negative as would be expected: most findings suggest that both positive and negative characteristics are attributed to older workers. Secondly, the views



expressed seem to vary according to the context in which they are sought (Kite and Johnson, 1988) and the descriptions provided to the participants (Barbato and Feezel, 1987). Thirdly, the relationship between the assumed negative views and individual behaviour are inherently problematic, often assumed in attitude research and possibly occurring only through experimental artefact as in Perdue and Gurtman (1990).

Moreover such explanations for discrimination against older workers are lacking in other respects. In treating the views held towards older workers as individual cognitive phenomena (although potentially shared), they have nothing to say about the origins of these views and why older workers should come to be regarded in such negative ways. The greatest difficulty however comes in relation to the ecological validity of all this research. Within all the studies reviewed, the data are collected in ways distanced from ordinary social interaction, either by the use of survey methods or by experimental control. Context is regarded as an unwanted variable, to be isolated from the matters under investigation. Language similarly receives little attention beyond being treated as a research tool available for unproblematic use. The choice of language used in such studies can though make all the difference, in the impact of the terms used on the participants and consequent variation in findings (Barbato and Feezel, 1987; Lepore and Brown, 1997). It is this very lack of regard for context and for language which brings problems for this approach to explaining age discrimination in employment, problems which ultimately are insurmountable.

Having considered the attitude and stereotyping approach to studying age discrimination, I turn now to an alternative approach which starts with the social context. Here the emphasis shifts from individual processes to explanations of how social factors come to be expressed in relation to individuals.

### ***Age discrimination and social inequalities***

A useful starting point for examination of this approach is the following 'working definition'<sup>4</sup> of ageism, provided by Bytheway and Johnson (1990: 36-7):

\* 1 Ageism is a set of beliefs originating in the biological variation between people and relating to the ageing process.

2 It is in the actions of corporate bodies, what is said and done by their representatives, and the resulting views that are held by ordinary ageing people, that ageism is made manifest.

In consequence of this, it follows that:

(a) Ageism generates and reinforces a fear and denigration of the ageing process, and stereotyping presumptions regarding competence and the need for protection.

(b) In particular, ageism legitimates the use of chronological age to mark out classes of people who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy, and who suffer the consequences of such denigration, ranging from well-meaning patronage to unambiguous vilification.'

This is a somewhat lengthy definition and I do not propose here to examine all aspects of it. It does however serve to illustrate the approach adopted by Bytheway and others. The two elements to which I particularly wish to draw attention are 'the actions of corporate bodies' (paragraph 2) and the 'classes of people who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy' (paragraph

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<sup>4</sup> Bytheway and Johnson (1990) argue that it is 'didactic' to attempt to provide a definitive definition of ageism.

2(b)). Ageism here is not viewed as the outcome of individual views towards older people but as the systematic operation of social processes embodied in the actions of corporate bodies as part of the social structure. Moreover these practices, according to Bytheway and Johnson (1990), systematically favour some groups of people in society while discriminating against others.

As with Butler and Lewis's (1973) definition, this 'working definition' draws upon a well-recognised strand of research carried out previously. One such earlier analysis is provided by Townsend (1979) in his comprehensive study entitled 'Poverty in the United Kingdom'. In this study, Townsend criticises the tendency of many researchers to give too much attention to the individual level of analysis and to study the elderly as if they were independent of the economy and general structures of society as a whole. The aim of his study accordingly is to redress the balance by examining the effects of national policies on a number of social minorities, including the elderly. These minorities were identified on the basis of other studies, popular discussion and Townsend's belief that the incidence of poverty would be higher among them than among other groups. For the purposes of the study, the elderly are defined as those of pensionable age. Citing figures to show that the elderly have substantially less disposable income than the non-elderly, Townsend argues that these figures in themselves provide clear evidence that the elderly as a group suffer from considerably higher levels of poverty than others and he takes this to be proof of major inequalities between the elderly and the non-elderly in society.

According to this line of argument, in order to understand how age discrimination operates in relation to employment or in other contexts, it is necessary to look to the social structures which privilege the young as a social group over the elderly. Many studies (e.g. Myles, 1984; Phillipson and Walker, 1987; Townsend, 1981) have offered such a structural analysis of age discrimination. I will examine in some detail here one of the most comprehensive and influential of such analyses, that provided by Phillipson (1982).

Phillipson (1982) takes up the theme that the origins of age discrimination, in employment and elsewhere, are structural. He agrees with Townsend (1979) that the elderly in general, and older workers in particular, as a social group are systematically disadvantaged within society. According to the Marxist analysis offered by Phillipson, this reflects the power relationships which are linked to the means of production within capitalist societies. In a society in which people are valued according to their productivity, older workers are regarded as less productive than younger workers. This, according to Phillipson, has led to older workers as a social group being viewed as a reserve of labour to be excluded from or called into the labour force at different points in time depending on the prevailing economic conditions.

Over the course of the twentieth century the economic conditions in the UK varied considerably, resulting in a somewhat mixed experience for older workers. For example, following the introduction of retirement pensions in 1908, and in response to high rates of unemployment in the depression of the 1920s and 1930s, older

people were frequently encouraged to retire from the labour market in order to make way for the young. One example of such calls for retirement is a resolution passed by the Transport and General Workers' Union Biennial Delegate Conference in 1929 stating 'That in view of the superannuation schemes being taken up throughout the country, our parliamentary representatives be instructed to raise the question of keeping pensioners out of competitive employment'. Retirement and the payment of retirement pensions accordingly became gradually institutionalised over the early part of the Twentieth century leading to more and more older workers leaving the workforce.

After the war however the economic situation dramatically changed. The immediate post-war years were marked by a considerable shortage of labour in various parts of the country and a general concern that an ever increasing number of non-productive pensioners would have to be supported by those in work during times of national economic hardship. Phillipson argues that in order to encourage older workers to remain in or return to the workforce the Government launched a major employment initiative emphasising the reliability and other positive abilities of older workers (see e.g. Ministry of Labour, 1953). This is in contrast to the pre-war years which lacked 'any legitimating ideology for retirement at a societal level' (*op. cit.*: 28). While this initiative brought about a return to the workforce for many older workers in the 1950s and 1960s, Phillipson argues that the position again became reversed in the 1970s with the onset of a world economic recession. As a result of this recession and of rapid technological advances in computers and electronics many workers became displaced from the labour force at this time. The brunt of the displacement was

largely borne by older workers who were regarded as a reserve of labour which was no longer required. In this way older workers became marginalised and excluded as a social group.

Phillipson rightly points out that age is only one aspect of the inequalities within the general social structure which are linked to the concept of productivity or non-productivity. People are also unequally positioned in relation to gender and class, among other social factors, and age as a structural inequality will interact with others. The experiences of unemployed men, for instance, will be very different from those of unemployed women. Notwithstanding other social inequalities however, age is explained as a major means of division between the productive and the less productive, the outcome of which is discrimination against older workers.

### *Social structures and employment*

Most writers within this line of research, while not explicitly adopting the Marxist analysis proposed by Phillipson (1982), would agree with the view that age discrimination arises from structural inequalities. These inequalities are regarded as systematically disadvantaging particular groups in society, including the elderly generally and older workers in particular. In the context of employment, one practice which discriminates against older workers is that of pensions legislation (Walker, 1990). As discussed briefly above, one effect of the introduction of pensions was to remove many older workers from the workforce. In the years which immediately followed the introduction of the pension in 1908, payment of the pension was

dependent on age and income, and not on retirement from the workforce. Many older workers could thus draw a pension and still remain in the workforce. During the inter-war period, when unemployment was high, this position led to many calls for either payment of the pension to be dependent upon retirement or for the amount of the pension to be increased to an amount sufficient to induce older workers to leave the workforce for good (Walker, 1990).

This situation changed after the war following the Government's acceptance and implementation of the Beveridge Report (Beveridge, 1942). For Beveridge, old age was one of the 'perils' against which the population should be insured and he argued therefore that people should be encouraged to remain in work and postpone claiming the pension for as long as possible. As a consequence when the new system of National Insurance was introduced in 1948 a new condition was attached to the pension: retirement from the workforce became mandatory. This retirement condition remained part of pensions legislation until it was finally abolished in 1989. According to Walker (1990), this one condition resulted in large numbers of older workers leaving the workforce in order to obtain payment, the opposite effect to that which Beveridge had intended. As a result, ages which had been initially arbitrary and determined for economic reasons became accepted as normal retirement ages and an intrinsic part of employment structures.

A number of other examples of practices which disadvantage older workers are given by Laczko and Phillipson (1990). They include age limits specified by employers in many job advertisements, lack of any employment protection

provisions for those over pensionable age, emergence of early retirement and unwillingness of employers to invest in training for older employees. For Laczko and Phillipson these are all instances of the structural inequality operating against older workers, all resulting from the prevailing view of older workers as less productive and less able to contribute to the labour force than younger people.

In this area of research therefore age discrimination becomes regarded very much as the outcome of 'the actions of corporate bodies (and) what is said and done by their representatives' as proposed by Bytheway and Johnson (1990). In emphasising the societal structures which promote and sustain age discrimination in employment and elsewhere the approach offers an explanation for the widespread incidence of ageism and age discrimination encountered within society. In accounting, for instance, for the very different experiences of older workers attempting to find employment in the pre-war and post-war years this would appear to be a more useful explanation than one focused on individual views. Similarly, an account of the context in which age discrimination occurs and which provides for the emergence of retirement at pensionable age as an accepted practice is necessary for an understanding of age discrimination in general. Nevertheless, the structural approach also brings its own difficulties.

### *Social structures and individuals*

While the research reviewed in this section provides a good description of the social processes which operate in relation to age it becomes difficult to envisage how these



become translated into individual action. Little attention has been paid to the individual except as a social product. In Phillipson's (1982) analysis, for example, little space is left for the individual except as the recipient of the social forces which predominate within capitalist society. Older workers consequently come to be seen as 'social dopes', powerless to bring about any change in a social climate of discrimination and inequality. The employer similarly is positioned within social structures, albeit more favourably. Far from being emphasised, as within Butler and Lewis's (1973) earlier definition of ageism, individual views and actions are totally subsumed into social structure.

Other writers allow more room for individual action than that offered by Phillipson's (1982) account. They attempt to link the structures operating within the social world to individual experience. Invariably this marks a return to the notion of view or attitude. For example, Scrutton (1990: 13) argues:

'The attitudes which dominate any society usually reflect the interests of the most powerful and influential social groups. Such attitudes may not be shared by everyone, but are accepted by most people without question . . . Commonly held ideas restrict the social role and status of older people, structure their expectations of themselves, prevent them achieving their potential and deny them equal opportunities.'

The suggestion that the experience of older people (older workers included) derives from 'attitudes' and 'commonly held ideas' in effect revisits the explanations reviewed in the earlier part of this chapter. Scrutton does not make explicit either the status of these 'attitudes' or 'ideas' or the processes by which they are acquired, that is how they are transmitted from the social world to the individual. Neither does he offer any evidence in support of this claim. The explanation accordingly runs into

the same difficulties discussed above in relation to the attitude and stereotyping studies.

In a similar return to the notion of attitudes, Taylor and Walker (1998) examine 'the relationship between attitudes held by personnel managers and employment practices affecting older workers' (*op. cit.*: 641). While agreeing with the broad analysis offered by Phillipson (1982), they argue that the macro structures of social inequality require study at the micro level, at the level of the institutions which operate discriminatory practices against older workers. In an analysis of data collected from 500 large employers, Taylor and Walker found a number of significant associations between aspects of work practices, as reported by personnel managers, and the attitudes of these same managers. One association found, for example, was that 'employers who did not provide training for managers aged 50 and over were more likely to report that older people did not want to train' (*op. cit.*: 653). Many of these findings at first sight appear impressive, showing a far stronger relationship between attitudes and behaviour than those found in previous studies. They seem less impressive however on closer examination of the measures used to obtain them. Unlike many previous studies, Taylor and Walker had no measure of behaviour other than that reported by the employers. Both the attitudes and the behaviour were reported by the same employers and it is not surprising that there is a good correspondence between them. The writers appear to accept employers' reports of both attitudes and behaviour as evidence of views and practices beyond the responses without considering other factors, such as the motivation of their participants and their interest in appearing consistent in their responses.

Furthermore, the relationship between macro and micro aspects of structure and individual beliefs about older workers is nowhere made explicit in the study, leaving the link between individual and social aspects of age discrimination untheorised. Taylor and Walker's findings consequently, however significant, still have shortcomings.

There remains then the difficulty for this approach of explaining how the structural inequalities which disadvantage older workers become translated into individual action by employers and older workers. Both positions essentially are determined by social structure. The actions of individual employers are left unexplained and this view of the older worker precludes the possibility of older workers themselves making any contribution to the continuation of age discrimination as an ongoing social process. Instead they are seen simply as the unfortunate victims of discrimination.

A further difficulty relates to age itself. Little explanation is offered as to why older workers should be regarded as less productive (cf. Phillipson, 1982), or why older people should be marked out as a class of people 'who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy' (cf. Bytheway and Johnson, 1990). Age, from this perspective, is instead simply accepted as part of the structure in place. As with the automaticity studies considered earlier, little scope is left for any change in the fortunes of older workers seeking employment. It is though questionable whether both age and the position of older worker are as fixed as this

analysis would suggest and I will now turn to studies which offer a rather different view of both.

### ***Age as a mundane resource and an interactional topic***

The two approaches reviewed above have offered very different perspectives on ageism and age discrimination in employment, focusing on individual processes and structural inequalities respectively. Neither approach however offers a convincing account of how age discrimination comes to be applied in everyday contexts such as employment. In this section I will therefore turn to studies which offer a somewhat different view of age and age-related descriptions in everyday life. As will be seen below, the work of the Couplands and their colleagues gives a different angle on the place of older people within ordinary social interactions. I will start though with a reconsideration of the concept of age itself, by examining the work of Bodily (1991, 1994).

#### ***The 'mundaneity' of ageism***

The background to Bodily's (1991, 1994) study was the nursing shortage, particularly in long-term care facilities, in the United States around 1989. As part of a search for potential solutions to the shortage, Bodily and a colleague circulated an open-ended questionnaire to inactive nurses aged over 50 living within the Illinois area. Older inactive nurses had frequently been excluded from previous studies either by oversight or design. In this study consequently their views were sought on

various issues relating to the nursing shortage, for example why they were not currently working in nursing, whether they would consider returning to nursing and whether they would be prepared to work in long-term care. A total of 1333 people responded to the questionnaire.

According to Bodily, what soon became apparent from a preliminary analysis of the responses was firstly, the volume of writing produced by respondents, and secondly the number of responses given which included some reference to age. Many respondents gave age either by itself (for example 'because of my age') or age in conjunction with some other factor (for example 'age and health') as a reason for no longer working in nursing or for not wishing to return to the profession. In addition, many questionnaires were returned uncompleted with some covering note or comment, written either by the nurse or by a relative. These notes and comments again frequently included a reference to age, this time as a reason for not completing the questionnaire, such as 'I do not really qualify as a representative to complete the survey, due to my age' or 'This questionnaire is being returned because the person to whom it is directed is 84 and not capable of answering it intelligently'. When these notes and comments were included with completed questionnaires, a total data set of 1497 responses to the questionnaires was obtained. Of these responses, 870 (58.1 per cent) contained at least one reference to age alone as an explanation. In most cases these references were to the age of the respondent, such as 'I'm too old' given as a reason for not working. Bodily termed these references to age 'self-directed ageism'. Other instances though were of 'other-directed ageism' where age was used either in relation to the elderly in long-term care or to the age of younger

nurses still working in the profession. Thus, for example, included in responses for not working in the profession were reasons such as '(there is) not enough excitement working with old people' and 'the young could mostly care less'. As a result of the frequent references to age which were found, Bodily expanded the focus of his study to examine age and its use by respondents as a primary topic.

Bodily argues that the sheer volume of responses using age as an explanation for not currently working in nursing or similar, or for not completing the questionnaire, is evidence of the power of age as an explanatory resource. Commonly age was provided as the sole explanation. In instances though where other factors were given together with age, these were usually ruled out of consideration, such as '(I am) no longer working because of age although in good physical condition'. Other explanations included descriptions such as 'age and physical limitations' and 'age and illness'. In these cases it is unclear, according to Bodily's argument, what 'age' added to the explanation given: if physical limitations or illness were to be regarded as the main reason for not working or not completing the questionnaire then age would appear to be superfluous.

The unelaborated uses of age in these ways, according to Bodily, indicate that the respondents took it for granted that age in itself would be and would be accepted as being a sufficient response to the question asked or to the questionnaire itself. In this way its use on relevant occasions would require no further expansion for a reader. Pollner (1987) previously had noted that in everyday life people commonly assume and act on the basis that others share with them the same knowledge of an

underlying reality. References to many aspects of life consequently are used and accepted without question and are not elaborated upon in everyday interaction unless explicitly challenged. This assumption of shared knowledge as a basis for interaction Pollner terms 'mundane reasoning'. Applying Pollner's argument to the responses obtained in his study, Bodily (1991, 1994) suggests that the unelaborated and matter of fact uses of age by his respondents display the 'mundaneity of ageism'.

Bodily further notes that ageism and the use of age as explanation is not limited to old people. Rather age as an explanatory resource can be equally applied to any class of objects. According to this argument, explanations for a car breaking down 'because it is old' or food going stale 'because it is old' similarly are ageist explanations in that they use age as an apparently natural resource. All of these explanations are ageist in attributing change simply to the passing of time, resting on the belief that time in itself causes things to happen. This is mistaken because it is the processes which occur over time which cause events to happen, not time in itself, a point noted over a century earlier by Darwin:

'The mere lapse of time by itself does nothing either for or against natural selection. I state this because it has been erroneously asserted that the element of time is assumed by me to play an all-important part in natural selection, as if all species were necessarily undergoing slow modification from some innate law.'

Darwin (1861:110f)

According to Bodily, the use of age as an explanatory resource whether in relation to people or other objects is dependent upon this erroneous assumption. It is such unreflective uses of age without reference to the processes occurring over time

which give age its power as a explanatory resource, and which allow its mundane use as a causal mechanism in itself. Thus ageism is defined by Bodily as '*the attribution of characteristics, abilities, limitations or events to the mere passing of time*' (1991: 258, emphasis added). The respondents to his questionnaire therefore did not have to specify what they meant by age as an explanation: they were simply making use of a readily available, socially constructed resource and assumed that others shared the same knowledge of this category. For Bodily, the power of ageism lies in the continued unquestioned use of age, whether by those who discriminate against older people, by older people themselves or by researchers, as an explanation rather than as a description.

The view of age given here is again very different from those provided by the approaches considered above. In so far as age itself receives attention in the individualist approach, it is regarded simply as an individual characteristic to be included in the age-related descriptions used as stimuli. Within the structuralist approach it similarly is paid little regard, being accepted and treated as part of the social structures in place. The argument here, that age can more usefully be viewed as a discursive resource used in everyday contexts, certainly offers a more flexible and potentially wider understanding of age and its applications than either of the other approaches. The extent to which Bodily's (1991, 1994) argument is supported by evidence is however more difficult. The responses obtained in his study appear consistent with the mundane nature of age which is claimed and provide a useful account of its deployment in situations of non-employment; specifically, accounting for retirement from nursing. However, his argument appears plausible but as yet



untested in other contexts. It does however open the way for an understanding of age discrimination which takes full account of age itself. This point I shall return to below in describing the aims and approach of the present study.

One element missing from Bodily's (1991, 1994) study is the interactional aspect of age. His data were obtained from questionnaire responses and did not allow for the examination of age in everyday interactive settings. The uses of age and negotiation of age-related identities in interactions are however topics which have been addressed in detail by Coupland and Coupland and their co-authors. Although little of this work has directly addressed the issue of age discrimination, these authors have researched various issues related to age, such as intergenerational relations (Coupland, Coupland, Giles and Henwood, 1988), disclosure of chronological age (Coupland and Coupland, 1989) and intergenerational talk (Coupland, Coupland, Giles and Henwood, 1991). Here, I propose to examine what this body of work can contribute to an understanding of age and its uses in different contexts.

### *Age as an interactional topic*

Before considering the findings obtained by the Couplands in their many studies, it is necessary to look in more detail at the approach which was adopted in this work. The approach used is termed 'communication accommodation theory' (CAT) and described most clearly in Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991), which incorporates many of their earlier studies. Communication accommodation theory is stated to be a successor to 'speech accommodation theory' (Giles, 1973; 1984; Giles and

Powesland, 1975). The aim of speech accommodation theory was to examine the ways in which speakers reduce or increase the social differences between them through modification of their language, or other interactional behaviours, using strategies of convergence and divergence. Previous studies using the speech accommodation model (Bradac, 1982; Giles and Hewstone, 1982) had found that in intergenerational talk younger speakers tended to use either overaccommodative strategies or underaccommodative strategies when speaking to older interactants. In the former, speakers would speak unnecessarily slowly or loudly to older listeners, while in the latter speakers made little attempt to relate to the needs of the older listener.

In the communication accommodation model a third element, namely 'linguistic maintenance', is added to the elements of convergence and divergence included in the earlier model. This and the two earlier elements provide a range of orientations which speakers are said to adopt towards others within interactions. Further, these orientations are associated with a range of sociolinguistic strategies, and the motives and interactional goals of speakers within different contexts. The aim of the communication accommodation model accordingly is to provide a model of discourse and context 'that recognises how linguistic variables intersect with speakers' and listeners' attitudes, goals and strategies, and with the outcomes of interaction.' (*op.cit.*: 25). It later becomes apparent however that some elements of this model carry more weight than others:

‘When a speaker has particular relational goals for an interaction (for example wanting to gain the other’s approval, wanting talk to be effective and efficient or, conversely, wanting to establish self or self’s social group as distinct from the interlocutor or her / his group) she or he will select from a range of sociolinguistic ( and non-verbal) strategies . . . Because it specifies processes of perception and evaluation, the model is useful to explain various forms of intentional or unintentional *mismatches* of communication styles’.  
(*ibid.*: 26, original emphasis)

Within the CAT model therefore, discourse and interaction come to be viewed as goal directed. The emphasis thus comes to be on the study of interaction as evidence of the perceptions and goals of the participants and on the communicative strategies and styles adopted in pursuit of these goals.

Many of the studies which apply the communication accommodation model are based on one particular data set: 40 videotaped interactions between pairs of participants, previously unknown to each other. Half of the participants were women aged 70 - 87 years recruited through two day centres, the other half were women aged 30 - 40 years recruited through newspaper advertisements. Of the interactions, 20 were ‘intergenerational’, between a younger woman and an older woman, and the remainder were ‘peer’ interactions, between either two younger women or two older women. Each participant took part in one ‘intergenerational’ and one ‘peer’ interaction.

Within the interactions, the older participants were commonly found to refer to age and to other aspects of their selves. References to age included both those which took the form of a disclosure of chronological age itself (e.g. ‘you wouldn’t believe it I’m eighty-seven’) and those which invoked age indirectly (e.g. ‘I’ll have to pay for that myself and I’m a pensioner’, ‘I’m a widow nearly seventeen years ago’).

Other common references to aspects of self included frequent mentions of bereavement or severe ill-health, termed 'painful self-disclosures' (PSDs) by Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991). According to the authors, both the references to age and the PSDs found in the exchanges were necessary to allow the participants to accommodate each other within the interaction. They argue consequently that '(i) is plausible that . . . patterns of self-disclosure can reveal generation-specific strategies for the management of intergenerational talk' (*op. cit.*: 76). References to age and other aspects of self thus come to be viewed as evidence of the particular strategies selected by the participants to accommodate the other person and as evidence of the interactional goals held by the participants.

- 1 Y2: are you have you just star have  
2 you ever kni knitted before?  
3 E2: yes! I've made  
4 [ ]  
5 Y2: oh you *used* to knit did you?  
6 E2: I've made myself *cardigans* and all=  
7 Y2: =yes=  
8 E2: =but my *eyes* are not so good see

(*op. cit.*: 82).

According to the analysis provided by Coupland et al. (1991), E2's remark at line 7 is necessary for both parties to the interaction to maintain the communicative distance between them. Knitting squares to make a blanket could be seen as a simple knitting task, whereas E2 has told Y2 that she used to knit 'cardigans and all'. The discrepancy, between E2's claim to have been a skilled knitter previously and her current actions in performing a simple knitting task, is said to have opened up an 'attributional void' (*op. cit.*: 83), which E2 is required to explain if the distance between the interactants is not to increase. An explanation by E2 that her eyes 'are not so good', (a PSD), functions as 'an adequate *and, we assume, truthful response* that provides the information specifically requested' (*ibid.*: 82, emphasis added). The PSD is seen as part of a strategy which accommodates Y2, and is taken to be evidence of E2's goal of promoting communicative efficiency.

As seen in the above extract, the painful self-disclosures found by Coupland et al. (1991) would often refer to an aspect of ill-health. The linking of health and age is a theme to which Coupland and Coupland (1993) return in a study of interactions between doctors and patients at a geriatric outpatients' clinic. Here the authors' concern is to examine ageist and anti-ageist discourse within the outpatient context. Previous studies had found that many elderly people would attribute ill-health to the ageing process itself and had limited aspirations for their future health. In so doing, they would use what Coupland and Coupland (1993) term a 'self-disenfranchising discourse'. Modern geriatrics, according to the authors, has committed itself in published accounts of its ideals to an anti-ageist ideology, intended to counter ageist attributions. This study therefore focuses on interactions between doctors and

elderly outpatients in order to examine the communicative strategies being used in pursuit of anti-ageist goals. A number of extracts are given in which the doctor is said to draw upon an anti-ageist discourse in response to the ageist 'self-disenfranchising discourse' of the patient. In one such lengthy example the (male) doctor is attempting to convince the patient (female, age 77) that she should stop smoking:

- Dr F: I've told your daughter (clears throat) not to  
buy you any drinks (.) not to give you any  
cigarettes either (4.0)  
PO8: (quietly, ironically) what a nice man you are!  
Dr F: (amused) hm!  
PO8: that you think that somebody at *seventy seven*  
Dr F: mm  
[  
PO8: can (breathes) *give* up smoking when she's  
smoked since she was fifteen  
Dr F: well that is the *reason* that you have to give  
up

(25 lines omitted)

- Dr F: *do* you want to  
stop smoking for a start?  
PO8: er *no* I don't want to stop it's the only  
pleasure I have

(later in the extract after further discussion about smoking)

- PO8: I'm a bit *old* now to give it up  
[  
Dr F: (loudly, emphatically) no you're *not* !

(*op. cit.*: 294-5)

The analysis offered by the writers is one of the patient's using self-disenfranchising discourse, showing limited health expectations in explicitly stating her age (seventy seven) early in the extract and later stating that she is 'a bit old' to give up smoking. The Couplands argue that, in response to this, the doctor explicitly adopts an anti-

ageist discourse proposing that better health can be achieved notwithstanding the patient's age. He specifically refutes her ageist claim ('no you're *not* !'). According to the authors, there is a limit as to how far the doctor can refute the self-disenfranchising discourse of the patient without increasing the communicative distance between them. The interaction between Dr F and PO8 consequently continues for some time after the extract given above without any agreement being reached.

The extracts above provide good examples of how age and age-related characteristics are open to negotiation by the parties involved in each interaction, and appear consistent with the authors' claim that 'elderliness' is in significant ways manufactured and modified in sequences of talk in which older speakers are involved' (Coupland, Coupland and Giles, 1991: 55). Again, a more flexible view of age is offered than that of the approaches considered earlier. For example, in the second extract above the negotiation of the identity of PO8 is clearly evident. Rather than being unproblematic or pre-determined by social structure, the meanings of age and its consequences for actions such as smoking become viewed as topics of the ongoing interaction.

The analyses of these extracts provided by the Couplands and their colleagues however are not without their difficulties. For example, the two extracts above, along with many of the other extracts given, are open to readings somewhat different from those suggested in these studies. Such difficulties moreover arise from the approach adopted by the authors, the communication accommodation

model itself, and its consequences for the analyses of the data obtained from the interactions.

A first difficulty arises from the authors' treatment of some discourse of the participants as 'true'. The remainder of the discourse is neither said to be true nor untrue. The problem with such a distinction is evident in relation to the first extract above, particularly E2's remark at line 7 of that exchange. This comment by E2 ('but my *eyes* are not so good see') is accepted by the authors as a true explanation, which maintains the communicative distance between E2 and Y2. In order however to view this remark as an explanation for E2's current knitting abilities as compared to previous ones, it is unnecessary to treat it either as true or untrue. Either way, it functions an account for her earlier claim. The requirement to distinguish truth from non-truth stems from the search for communicative strategies and goals in terms of the model, rather than adding to the analysis of the extract. We are in any event offered no basis for any such distinction.

The second and similar difficulty for the analyses comes from the authors' emphasis in terms of the communication accommodation model on the identification of the participants' communicative goals. Disclosures of chronological age, indirect references to age, painful self-disclosures and others thus become regarded as evidence of the operation of the strategic processes from which can be inferred the perceptions and communicative goals of the participants. The consequence of this focus is little analytic attention is given to many of the interactional aspects of the exchanges. Applying the CAT framework to the second extract above (interaction



between Dr. F and PO8) appears to lose sight of the role of much of the discourse in the exchange. Again, the focus of the analysis provided by Coupland and Coupland (1993) is on particular utterances of the interactants as evidence of their respective communicative strategies. Dr F's denial of PO8's statement that she is 'a bit old' is claimed to reflect his anti-ageist strategy for the interaction. PO8's remark itself is said to be 'a defeatist, age-self handicapping formulation' (*op. cit.*: 296). The interaction accordingly is explained by the authors as reflecting the goal of Dr F to persuade Patient PO8 that her self-disenfranchising discourse of being too old is inappropriate.

A closer analysis of the discourse in the exchange though would offer a somewhat different interpretation to that provided by the Couplands. In the early part of the sequence Dr F tries to persuade PO8 to stop smoking. PO8 in response offers reasons why she should not stop, and indeed she states that smoking is a pleasure she enjoys. Against this background her subsequent deployment of age can be seen as an action which attempts to prevent Dr F from continuing to persuade her to stop smoking. Similarly, Dr F's refutation of her remark can be seen as disputing her claim that she has a good reason for continuing to smoke. The issue of whether PO8 has good reason to continue smoking remains unresolved between them at the end of the sequence. These do not have to be viewed as evidence of extra-discursive goals in order to understand the actions which are performed. As with the first extract above, the requirement to look beyond the interaction to the perceptions and goals of the participants stems from the CAT model itself. Again the use of the model appears to add little to our understanding of the exchange.

Although the approach adopted by the Couplands and their colleagues brings with it these difficulties, what it does offer nonetheless is an analysis of how age is used to accomplish interactional tasks which differs from the approaches considered earlier in this chapter. The examples provided show how, instead of being 'given' or fixed, age-related attributes can be and are negotiated by participants in the course of interactional sequences. Consequently age-related characteristics, instead of being regarded as mental representations or pre-determined by social structure, come to be viewed as negotiable and in Wetherell and Maybin's (1996) terms 'emergent' from relevant everyday contexts. In each extract, the meaning of age and its consequences for the abilities of the older participant, whether in relation to knitting or giving up smoking, can be viewed as matters of discussion, possible agreement or as left unresolved. As with the work of Bodily (1991, 1994), this view of age as negotiated in everyday interaction opens the way for an examination of how this is achieved in certain contexts. For purposes of the present study, it allows for an examination of how age discrimination and the characteristics of older workers are negotiated in particular contexts of employment and non-employment.

### ***Aims of the present study***

In the first half of this Chapter I have examined previous research bearing directly on age discrimination in employment from two main approaches, the individualist and the structuralist. While both strands of research offer explanations for age discrimination, these explanations appear at best partial, leaving aspects of

discrimination unexplained or only partly theorised. The explanation offered in each case provides little account of the everyday practice of discrimination against older workers in relevant contexts.

The work of Bodily (1991, 1994) offers a reconceptualisation of age as a discursive resource. In his study age was used mundanely to explain the non-employment of his respondents and is potentially equally available for such use in other contexts. From the work of the Couplands and their colleagues, aspects of age can be viewed as negotiable in everyday interaction. Drawing on both sets of studies, in the present study I examine the deployment of age and its negotiation specifically in relation to the employment and non-employment of older workers. In this investigation however, and in contrast to the work of the Couplands, the focus here is not on the communication goals of participants within interactions or other extra-discursive matters but instead on uses of age and discursive accomplishments in their own right.

Many writers in social psychology over the last two decades (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine, 1984; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995) have argued that it is more useful to treat discourse as a topic of study in its own right than as a resource in pursuit of other entities. Discourse, in Potter and Wetherell's (1987) terms, becomes the topic of study and not the resource for study. According to this view, discourse does not (merely) represent events, people, actions and so on but acts to construct versions of them. Language accordingly is viewed as construction, not representation: the

versions offered by individuals cannot be taken or accepted as evidence of any reality lying beyond the discourse but instead become topics of investigation in their own right.

The language used in construction moreover carries with it a history of past usage and meanings. This history and the meanings with which any language is imbued undermine any sense of language being available and used as a neutral, descriptive medium. Rather, the meanings acquired over time, in Eagleton's (1983) terms the 'sediment of social practices', become salient in the present with the use of language in everyday interactions.

In the present study of age discrimination in employment therefore, all discourse is viewed as action and not as representing internal views or processes, social structures or communicative goals. Discourse of older jobseekers and employers in contexts relevant to everyday employment is examined for the actions being performed by the participants. At the same time, I have regard also for the meanings acquired by the discourse used within these contexts. Bodily (1991, 1994) has argued that age in particular has acquired considerable power as a discursive resource. Its availability and power in relation to the present topic, employment and non-employment of older workers, are yet to be seen. Other resources may well be equally available in addition. A focus on the resources drawn upon within these contexts can thus be viewed as complementary to that on the actions being achieved by the participants in using these resources.

Two other features also mark out the present study as different from previous work conducted on this topic. Firstly, the focus of this study is on the accounts of the participants. Previous work on age discrimination, as discussed above, almost invariably has either examined data obtained from attitude surveys or experimental settings, or has looked to social structures rather than individuals. Here I foreground the views of those directly involved in the practice of age discrimination against older workers. Examination of the accounts they produce in more naturalistic settings allows for a fuller analysis of their views than would be possible by other methods.

Secondly, in this study I examine the accounts both of employers and of older jobseekers. Previous studies into age discrimination have concentrated exclusively on the views of employers and others towards the older worker or older jobseeker. Older workers and older jobseekers, in contrast, have been conspicuous by their absence from such research. In the present study I address this omission. By examining the views of both employers and jobseekers I also produce a more comprehensive understanding of age discrimination as social practice than could be obtained by focusing on either group by itself.

In summary then, in the present study I look at the discursive actions being performed by older jobseekers and employers in employment-relevant contexts, and secondly the resources used by each group to perform these actions. From this examination I derive an understanding of the sense made by each group of current employment practices towards older workers in this country. This focus produces an

understanding of age discrimination as everyday social practice, an understanding which has been missing from previous work.

The aims of the present study therefore were as follows:

- (1) to analyse the descriptions given by older jobseekers and employers of current employment practices towards older workers and the actions which were performed by these descriptions;
- (2) to analyse the discursive resources, including age itself, used by older jobseekers and employers in constructing their accounts of current employment practices, and
- (3) through an analysis of the actions and discursive resources used by older jobseekers and employers to provide an understanding of age discrimination against older workers as ongoing social practice.

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## Chapter three

### Method of the study

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#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I set out the method adopted in this research. Prior to the main study, an initial study was conducted into the aspects of employment practice of most relevance to older jobseekers. The findings from this initial study were used to generate a protocol used in interviews in the main study. The main study comprised three main stages, namely data collection, coding and analysis. All of these matters are described in detail in this chapter.

Before turning to description of the method however, it is necessary to set out in greater detail the approach adopted in the study. At the end of Chapter 2, I described the aims of the present research as comprising analysis of the discursive actions of and resources used by older jobseekers and employers in relation to current

employment. The term discourse analysis however has been used to describe a spectrum of approaches within social psychology. While such approaches share a focus on language and its effects, they differ in many respects. Not least of these are the place afforded to the individual within language and the role of the researcher in conducting an analysis. I will begin therefore by describing these approaches in more detail, leading to a statement of the approach adopted in the present study.

### ***Discourse analysis***

The term 'discourse analysis' has in recent years been applied to quite distinct strands of research within social psychology (see e.g. Antaki, 1994; Burr, 1995; Taylor, 2001a; Wetherell, 2001; Widdicombe, 1998). For a consideration of discourse analysis, an appropriate starting point is the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987), who are credited with having introduced the term to social psychology. In their book, Potter and Wetherell have three stated aims: one, to introduce to social psychology the study of social texts; two, to provide a resource for those interested in carrying out such research, and three, to show how theoretical notions such as attitudes and categories which are treated as fundamental by other approaches can be usefully addressed by the study of language.

Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach emphasises three elements, namely function, construction and variation. The notion of function draws on speech act theory (Austin, 1962) which argues that language always has an action orientation. People use language to do things, such as to request, to argue, to justify and so on. One task



for discourse analysis accordingly to identify the functions achieved by people through the use of language. Additionally, in using language people are actively constructing versions of other people, of events and of other categories. Language thus has to be studied as a process of active construction and not as representation. Finally, the constructions produced by people are linked to the context in which they are produced. In any examination of language use over time, it is inevitable therefore that variation will be found in the constructions which are produced.

Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that an aim of analysis should be the identification of patterns of recurring features of language use, or 'interpretative repertoires'. They define interpretative repertoires as:

'recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena. A repertoire like the empiricist and contingent repertoires, is constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes).'

(*ibid.*: 149)

In light of the elements of function, construction and variation outlined above, it is inevitable also that the repertoires which people use will vary over occasions and contexts. The task of the analyst therefore, in addition to the identification of repertoires themselves, is to identify the occasions of and functions served by deployment of these repertoires.

An often quoted example of such an approach is to be found in a study by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), conducted within the discipline of the sociology of scientific

knowledge. At the time of their study, there were two competing theories within biochemistry regarding the formation of a particular molecule involved in the storing of energy in cells. Thankfully the details of the debate are of not of particular relevance here. Gilbert and Mulkay studied the ways in which biochemists accounted for their methods and the choice of one theory over the other, both in 'formal' and 'informal' settings. In 'formal' settings, the participants were found to describe their methods in ways which emphasised the neutrality of the scientist and the role of the data themselves. Data were presented as having authority over the choice of the theory and the scientist was mentioned rarely, if at all. Where the individual scientist was included, he or she was referred as being constrained by the data and findings. This manner of accounting Gilbert and Mulkay term the 'empiricist repertoire'.

Although in interviews participants would also use the empiricist repertoire, such accounting was found to be used alongside other descriptions of method and theory choice. These descriptions referred to human agency and personal factors, such as insights, beliefs and skills. Here, the emphasis was on the role of such human and personal factors rather than on the data themselves. Gilbert and Mulkay term this second way of accounting the 'contingent repertoire'.

Importantly, these two repertoires were found to be used by biochemists on different occasions. One particular context of use was when the participants were accounting for error: the empiricist repertoire was used to support the biochemists' own positions and claims while the contingent repertoire was used to undermine the

claims of others. As Gilbert and Mulkay note, it was not that the biochemists could not or did not distinguish between these repertoires in describing method and theory choice during the interviews. Rather they used each repertoire on different occasions and towards different ends. The analysis provided by Gilbert and Mulkay accordingly identified the repertoires used, the occasions of use of each and the functions served by these uses.

This study then provides a good example of the approach to discourse analysis promoted by Potter and Wetherell (1987). However few writers within social psychology since then have advocated such an approach and it has, to some extent, been overtaken by more recent developments. In recent social psychology it has become common practice to distinguish between two main approaches to discourse analytic work. In the first of these approaches, the emphasis is predominantly on language as actually used in everyday contexts, or 'talk in interaction' (Schegloff, 1992). Drawing on work in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and conversation analysis (e.g. Sacks, 1992), the main interest for writers here lies in the action orientation of language and the accomplishments of speakers in talk (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Widdicombe, 1998; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). Analytic interest focuses on the immediate or 'proximate' context of the interaction, the sequential organisation of talk and the orientations of the participants themselves to the actions being performed. Features of talk, such as question and answer adjacency pairs, commonly recur within interactions and are used and responded to by participants in identifiable patterns. The task for the analyst becomes one of identifying the features

used by the participants themselves and the discursive accomplishments which are performed through these features.

Theorists within this approach have placed less emphasis on the nature of the resources, or repertoires being deployed by speakers, and greater emphasis on the actions being performed through language use. Edwards and Potter (1992, 1993), for example, in promoting what they term the 'discursive action model' (DAM), argue that the focus of analysis should be on:

'discursive actions performed in everyday life, as a constitutive part of activity sequences that involve interpersonal or intergroup issues such as blame, responsibility, reward, compliment, invitation and so on'

*(op. cit.: 24).*

Potter (1996a) similarly argues that rather than looking at and identifying interpretative repertoires, primary analytic attention should be given to the devices and procedures used by speakers to construct particular versions and present these as factual in accomplishing actions such as blaming or accountability.

The emphasis within this strand of research has led to changes in the analytic approach from that advocated by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Work within this approach has come to focus primarily on the conversational structures used by participants within sequences of talk; the intonations, and grammatical forms and other designed features which speakers respond to and use. Analysis along these lines has been used to show, for example, how participants resist and negotiate potentially problematic identities such as those of gun-owners (McKinlay and

Dunnett, 1998), ethnic group members (Day, 1998) or punks (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990). The task for the analyst is one of showing, through fine-grained analysis of talk in interaction, how and when participants make issues of identity, blaming, mitigation and so on relevant within the local context.

The second approach, derived from post-structuralist ideas (e.g. Barthes, 1973; 1977; Derrida, 1976) and particularly those of Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1972; 1980), offers a somewhat different view both of language itself and of individuals in relation to it. Rather than examining the interactional aspects of talk and what speakers accomplish in conversation, the focus is on language or 'discourses' in a somewhat wider sense. Instead of focusing on the proximate context, analysts look to the wider or 'distal' context within which interactions take place. Similarly, the emphasis moves from features of talk, or interpretative repertoires, to the study of the social nature of language or discourses. A discourse is viewed as a coherent system of meanings, which is inextricably linked to social process (see e.g. Hollway, 1984; Parker, 1992) and which reproduces societal power relations and ideologies.

One consequence of this attention to discourses is that the focus shifts from the individual as language user found in the first approach. Instead the discourse itself is viewed as primary and individuals are seen as secondary to the discourse being used. People are called into being, or 'interpellated' in Althusser's (1971) terms, by the discourses prevailing in society in ways which enable social processes to continue. At the same time, taking up positions within these discourses provides individuals with a coherent sense of identity within society. Thus, for example, the

use of medical discourse reproduces and maintains power relationships between doctor and patient where the former is empowered to diagnose and treat the latter. At the same time, through its use it makes available identity positions such as 'consultant' and 'patient', and (re)produces institutional objects such as 'hospital' and 'clinic', all of which are immediately recognisable and accepted as part of social process (Foucault, 1972, 1980).

Discourses, according to this argument, are to be found within texts of any kind and not just conversations. Parker (1992: 6) defines texts as 'delimited tissues of meaning reproduced in any form that can be given an interpretative gloss'. The task for the analyst accordingly is one of examining the text in order to identify the discourse being reproduced, the power relations operating and the identity positions brought into play. Given the wide definition of text provided above, the range of materials available for analysis becomes somewhat wider than the focus on 'talk in interaction' seen in the first approach. It is possible to examine any materials for meaning, for example, the packaging of children's toothpaste (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall, 1994). Whether such topics are as appropriate for analysis as other forms of text is of course another matter (see Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995: 59-61 for a discussion).

In practice, researchers within this approach have concentrated largely on the analysis of language itself rather than texts of other kinds. Analysis of heterosexual discourse, for example, has revealed the reproduction of male / female power relations and the consequences for masculine and feminine identities (Hollway,

1984). Similarly, the marital discourse of trust which positions spouses as inherently safe sexual partners has been shown to have consequences for the effectiveness of sex education programmes by disempowering individuals who might otherwise insist on condom use (Willig, 1999). Thus, discourse analysis within this approach, or analysis of discourses as it has become commonly known, involves the identification of the discourse(s) being used, examination of the power relations inherent within the discourse and the consequences for individuals in terms of the possibilities made available or unavailable to them.

Each of these two approaches has its proponents and its critics. The focus on immediate interaction in the first approach runs the risk of an inattention to the wider social context and to the culturally shared nature of the resources used by participants (Wetherell, 1998). Additionally, many forms of language are inappropriate for a fine-grained analysis of their organisation. It is argued, on the other hand, that the second approach relies upon the introduction by the analyst of extraneous material which is commonly unsupported by the data available (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). Moreover, it is argued that this approach in effect 'reifies' the discourses found within texts in treating them as single unified entities and, in so doing, does little more than reproduce common sense dressed up as scientific knowledge (Potter, Wetherell, Gill and Edwards, 1990).

In the present study I take the line, following Wetherell (1996, 1998), that elements from each of the two approaches above can be usefully combined to produce a fuller analysis than one obtainable from the use of either approach alone. The analytic

approach adopted for this study stems from both practical and theoretical concerns. On a practical level, the data used here comprised both transcribed interactional discourse and previously existing written material. While analysis of sequential organisation of discourse could be applied to the first of these sources, it obviously would be inappropriate for the second set of data. A fine-grained analysis therefore would not have been possible for the whole study. On a theoretical level, one focus of the present study was on the action orientation of language, the ways in which participants achieved particular actions with discourse. A further concern however was with the resources, including age, used by the participants in carrying out these actions. These resources can usefully be regarded as culturally shared forms of understanding, forms which extend beyond the grammatical features found in talk to the content of the descriptions provided. That is not to argue that these have to be or should be treated as monolithic discourses which roll on regardless of human action, but rather that a focus on such resources recognises their widely shared availability and apparent acceptance as such by the participants. The present approach to analysing how people 'do' age, therefore, involved examination of both the discursive actions performed by participants and on the social resources drawn upon within the context of the study.

### ***Preliminary study***

Before conducting the main study, a preliminary investigation was carried out into the current employment issues of most relevance to jobseekers. The requirement for this preliminary study resulted from the dearth of previous research on this precise



topic. As discussed in Chapter Two, many studies over the years have looked at employers' views of workers, practices and employment issues. No previous work in this country had looked at the views of older workers or jobseekers themselves. The necessity for some knowledge of jobseekers' views however arose not simply from a concern to redress this balance. Central to the aims of this study were the examination of the understandings produced by the participants themselves of current employment practices. One consequence of these aims was the need to identify more specifically the issues of most relevance to the participants. An initial investigation into the views of jobseekers themselves was therefore carried out by way of focus groups.

The use of focus groups in social science research has enjoyed an increasing popularity over the last fifteen years. One possible reason for this upsurge is the considerable flexibility of the method. Commonly, focus groups can be used either to generate data which are then analysed in their own right or to produce data which are supplementary to other methods of inquiry. Thus, for example, they have been used to investigate topics as diverse as 'savings' (Lunt, 1996) and regional identity (Gervais, 1993) and used as supplementary to other methods such as questionnaire design (e.g. Hyland, Finnis and Irvine, 1991) or interpretation of survey results (e.g. Winborne and Dardaine, 1993). What all these uses have in common however is their attention to the 'participants' understandings of and perspectives on certain issues' (Millward, 2000).

In the present study, focus groups were used solely as a method of generating interview topics for the main inquiry. Specifically, focus groups were used to identify and focus the issues which would be of prime importance to jobseekers in the main study. Two focus groups were conducted with older jobseekers, details of which are given in the following section.

### *Participants and recruitment*

Recruitment for this preliminary study was combined with recruitment of jobseekers for the main study. Individuals targeted for participation were jobseekers aged over forty, who were registered as being unemployed at local (Edinburgh) jobcentres. An age limit of forty and above was selected on the basis of previous research which suggests that age discrimination is more evident for this age group than for younger people (e.g. Allan, 1990).

Recruitment was carried out through four local jobcentres. Publicity materials in the form of posters and flyers were prepared and distributed to managers of these jobcentres. Jobseekers who were interested in participating in the study responded to myself either directly or via the manager. Prospective participants were asked to indicate whether they wished to participate in a focus group, a one-to-one interview or both.

Sixteen jobseekers responded by indicating a desire to take part in a focus group. Of these, eight subsequently attended the first focus group and four attended the second

group. These twelve jobseekers comprised the participants for this preliminary study.

It was intended at the commencement of recruitment to draw participants as widely as possible from different occupational backgrounds, using quota sampling in terms of the categories of the Standard Occupational Classification (UK Government Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1990). This proved impossible due to the relatively low numbers of jobseekers who responded to the publicity materials. The twelve jobseekers who participated accordingly represent an opportunity sample of all the jobseekers who expressed an interest in taking part in the study and who subsequently attended the two focus groups.

### *Discussion protocol*

An interview protocol was devised for use in the focus groups. Questions included in the protocol were derived from the findings of previous research into employers' views and from wider issues relating to age discrimination in employment at that time. The fourteen questions used covered four general topics, as follows: the participants' personal experiences of being unemployed (age was not mentioned in these questions); age in relation to their personal experiences of looking for work; their views of older workers, and their views of employers' practices towards older workers and of potential Government interventions. The protocol thus included questions such as 'Have the abilities or skills which you could contribute to a new job changed over the years?' and 'Do you think that in general employers

discriminate against older workers?'. All items were intended to facilitate open-ended discussion rather than to give rise to brief responses, with supplementary probes available for use if required. A copy of the interview protocol used is attached as Appendix 1.

### *Discussions*

Two focus groups were held thereafter. Previous work is divided on the optimum size for a group. Some writers have suggested that the optimum number of participants for a focus group is between six and twelve, with fewer participants providing less breadth of views and less useful discussion (e.g. Kreuger, 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Others argue that larger groups lead to reduced participation of the individuals involved and that an ideal number of members is between six and eight (e.g. Albrecht, Johnson and Walther, 1993; Asbury, 1995). In the present study therefore, eight of the jobseekers who had previously expressed a willingness to take part in a group discussion were invited to attend each of the groups. All of the jobseekers invited to take part in the first group attended. Only four of those invited to attend the second group did attend the meeting.

The first group met in a room provided within a local jobclub. The second group met within the Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh. Each discussion lasted between one and one and a half hours. On both occasions the group discussion was tape-recorded with the consent of all of those present and was

subsequently transcribed to a 'first-pass' level which incorporated speech but not speech particles (e.g. 'um', 'er' etc.), pauses or other features.

### *Analysis*

Discourse analysis of the transcribed material was carried out to a level sufficient to identify the themes of most interest to the participants. The transcribed data were sorted to identify questions from the interview protocol to which participants responded at length, questions included in the protocol which generated little interest or discussion and themes which emerged from the discussion of the participants themselves. Analysis was used to generate a revised interview protocol for use in one-to-one interviews. Questions which had attracted little discussion were dropped and new questions were included to reflect themes which emerged in the focus group discussions. A revised protocol, used in the main study, accordingly included questions on issues more relevant to the jobseekers rather than those initially considered relevant by the researcher.

### ***Data collection for the main study***

Data for the main study were collected from three sources, namely:

- (1) Interviews with older jobseekers;
- (2) Written equal opportunities policies of employers, and
- (3) Interviews with employers.

The use of interviews to collect data from both jobseekers and employers drew upon a method well-established in social psychology generally and in discursive psychology in particular. Semi-structured interviews, in which the order of topics and precise wording of questions is allowed to vary, afford a reasonably naturalistic context in which the participants are able to express their views freely and the interviewer adds comments or asks further questions as judged appropriate. In this way, they resemble more closely an everyday conversational encounter than a more formal and distanced procedure.

As Potter and Wetherell (1987: 163-4) point out, interviews in discourse analytic research are very different from those in other forms of social research. Instead of looking simply for consistency in interviewees' responses, the discourse analyst is concerned also with variation in responses. It is the variation which is useful in uncovering the range of discursive resources available to the interviewees, the occasions on which these resources are used and the actions performed by such uses. One aim in conducting the interviews then was to encourage rather than minimise variation in responses, using prompts, normal conversational markers ('mm hm') and counter examples where appropriate, in order to explore more fully the resources drawn upon by the participants. By so doing the interview comes more closely to resemble an instance of everyday interaction and, as Wetherell and Potter (1992) observe, the researcher is able to 'access some of the wide range of different sorts of arguing and thinking that the participants would have produced outside the interviews' (*op. cit.*: 99).

In addition to the collection of data from interviews, data were collected from the pre-existing source of written equal opportunities policies. These policies were directly relevant to employers' descriptions of the practices operated within their organisations. Accordingly, the use of data from this source as well as interview data provided an additional and complementary perspective on employers' descriptions of their practices.

### *Interviews with older jobseekers*

#### **Participants and recruitment for main study**

Participants for one-to-one interviews were recruited at the same time as and using the same recruitment procedure as described above in relation to the focus groups. Initially twenty-four jobseekers aged forty or over responded to the publicity materials by indicating a wish to participate in one-to-one interviews. Subsequent to these indications of interest, four respondents could not be contacted further and six respondents withdrew from the study due to changes in their circumstances. Interviews were held thereafter with the remaining fourteen respondents, again representing an opportunity sample. The participants in one-to-one interviews are set out in Appendix 2.

## Protocol for interviews with jobseekers

A revised interview protocol for individual interviews was developed on the basis of analysis of the focus group data, as described above. Questions included in the revised protocol again covered four main topics, namely: the participants' views of older workers; age and their personal experiences of looking for work; their views of employers' practices towards older workers, and their personal experiences of being unemployed (age was not mentioned in these questions). Thus interviewees were asked, for example, 'Do you think that in general there are differences between workers aged over forty and younger workers?' and 'Do you think that there are any situations where age discrimination is justified?'. Again, all items included were designed to be open-ended with probes being used if required. A copy of the protocol used in interviews with older jobseekers is attached as Appendix 3.

## *Interviews*

All interviews were conducted within the Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh. An interview room was used in each case and external noise kept to a minimum. Each interview was conducted on a semi-structured basis. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were tape-recorded with the participants' consent. Procedures adopted for transcription, coding and analysis of the recorded data are detailed in the respective sections below.



## Participating organisations

Potential participants for this part of the study were identified on the basis of recruitment advertisements in one or more of three national newspapers. Recruitment advertisements were selected in which the organisation advertising specifically claimed to be 'an equal opportunities employer', to be 'committed to equal opportunities in employment' or made a similar claim and these were retained for preparation of a pool of participants.

In order to obtain a sample of employers across all sectors of the UK economy, originally it was intended to use a quota sampling technique based on the nine divisions of the Standard Industrial Classification (Revised) 1997 (SIC(R)) (Central Statistical Office, 1997). This proved impossible in practice, due to a shortage of equal opportunities claims by employers in some divisions, for example Division 3 'Metal goods, Engineering and Vehicle Industries', and a shortage of any recruitment adverts by employers in other divisions, for example Division 1 'Energy and Water Supply Industries'. A revised classification of employers was therefore prepared for the purposes of this study. This classification included five categories of employers which regularly made equal opportunities claims in their advertisements, as follows: 'government departments'; 'local government bodies'; 'registered charities'; 'business organisations'; and 'other public bodies'. A total of

fifty organisations making equal opportunities claims were identified, including ten employers from each category of the revised classification.

The fifty organisations identified were then approached to participate in the study. A letter was sent to each advising them of the aims of the study and requesting copies of their equal opportunities policy and any other relevant documentation. All organisations were assured of confidentiality in taking part in the study. Of the fifty organisations contacted, twenty-nine subsequently responded enclosing documents. These twenty-nine participating organisations comprised six from each of the revised categories, with the exception of the category 'other public bodies' from which five responses were received. Further details of the participating organisations are included in Appendix 4.

#### Written policies obtained

The documents supplied by the twenty-nine organisations participating varied considerably both in length and number. Some employers provided copies of a primary policy document together with several sub-policies, running to considerable length. Others simply enclosed a single sheet of paper, setting out a two paragraph statement of policy.

The procedures used in coding and analysing the policies collected are described in the coding and analysis sections below.

## Participants and recruitment

The participants recruited for interviews with employers were Human Resources Managers and Recruitment Managers of medium to large organisations operating on a UK wide basis. These managers were selected because the individuals concerned would be involved on a day to day basis in the employment and recruitment of staff for their organisations. Potential participants were identified on the basis of recruitment advertisements by their organisations, in one or both of two national newspapers, in which he or she was specifically named as the contact person for the job vacancy.

Two pools of potential participants were prepared. One pool comprised twenty-five named individuals, whose organisations had made explicit claims in relation to equal opportunities in employment. The other pool comprised twenty-five named individuals in organisations which made no such claims. Each pool of potential participants comprised an opportunity sample of twenty-five participants identified from recruitment advertisements over a six week period.

Each potential participant was initially contacted by letter, requesting him or her to participate in the study. The letter sent to each potential participant explained the aims of the study and stated that all information provided would be used only on an anonymous basis. In cases where no response was received, the individual was

subsequently telephoned and again, where possible, asked to participate. Following these contacts, twelve managers in organisations which made explicit equal opportunities claims agreed to and did participate in subsequent one-to-one interviews. None of the managers in organisations which did not make equal opportunities claim agreed to participate. Further details of the participants and their organisations are given in Appendix 5.

### **Protocol for interviews with employers**

An interview protocol was devised for use in the one-to-one interviews. The questions included in this protocol reflected the participation only of managers working for organisations which made explicit equal opportunities claims. Questions were based on previous research into employers' views towards older workers, research into the operation of equal opportunities in employment and recent developments in the employment context. Most notable among the last of these was the publication of the UK Government Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999). The questions ranged across four broad topics, namely: equal opportunities in employment; the employment of older workers in the organisation; the participant's views of older workers, and the recruitment practices of the organisation in relation to older jobseekers. Particular questions thus included, for example 'What sort of age balance is there in your organisation between younger workers and the over 40s?' and 'Do you think age is an important factor in recruitment?'. Again, questions were open-ended and probes were used if appropriate. A copy of the interview protocol is attached as Appendix 6.

## *Interviews*

Each interview was conducted on the premises of the participant's organisation in a room made available by them. In each case the interview lasted approximately one hour and was tape-recorded with the participant's consent.

The procedures used for transcription, coding and analysis of the recorded data are detailed in the respective sections below.

## ***Data analysis***

### *Transcription*

Transcription of recorded interview data is not simply a process of capturing in writing the material which has been recorded. As Ochs (1979: 44) observes, transcription rather is 'a selective process reflecting theoretical goals and definitions'. The researcher determines which features of the discourse and context are relevant to the research being undertaken and which features can be omitted (Cook, 1990). In this study the aims of the research, the 'theoretical goals', were concerned with the broad sense-making practices of the participants and the discursive resources and forms of accounting used within these. A fine-grained conversation analytic transcription (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984), incorporating

intonation, timed pauses and other sequential features of the interviews, was therefore unnecessary and would have added to the time required for transcription.

Accordingly, the interviews conducted with jobseekers and employers were all transcribed using an abbreviated version of the full Jefferson style (in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). Speech particles ('er', 'um' etc.), errors, pauses (which were not timed) and overlapping speech were included, but most other features found in conversation analytic transcripts were omitted. Commas, full stops and question marks were later added to improve the readability of the transcripts. Details of the transcription notation used are given in Appendix 7.

I transcribed the first two interviews, in order to expedite transcription and to get a better feel for the progress of the interviews and for the data. The remainder of the transcription was carried out by a succession of three audio typists, recruited especially for this work. I thereafter went over and checked the transcripts, adding punctuation where appropriate and correcting any apparent errors prior to analysis.

### *Coding*

Transcription of the recorded interview data from jobseekers and employers, together with the written policies obtained from employers, produced three data sets of considerable size. Prior to any analysis, each of these data sets was coded separately, reflecting the nature of the written material and the particular questions of interest.

## Coding interviews

Initial codings of the transcripts of interviews with jobseekers focused on references to age itself, references to older workers and other age-related descriptions (e.g. younger workers). Codings for the transcripts of interviews with employers initially focused on these topics also, together with references to equal opportunities in employment and diversity in the workplace. Passages were selected inclusively, including extracts which might later appear irrelevant rather than omitting parts which could turn out to be of relevance. Later codings of each set of transcripts took into account also the broad topics of the interview protocol in each case. This process was recursive: as themes of interest began to emerge from the data the transcripts were examined again for any other passages which then appeared relevant. Some extracts which had been initially included then seemed less useful and could at that point be excluded. By this time similar themes of interest had emerged from both sets of interview transcripts. After several recursions, the coding files for each data set emerged in a form appropriate for analysis.

## Coding policy documents

Variation in the form, length and content of the written equal opportunities policies supplied by organisations produced an extremely disparate range of materials. Following the guidelines proposed by Potter and Wetherell (1987), the initial coding focused on similarities across the materials. The only element which could be

regarded as common to all documents supplied was a statement of the aims or scope of the policy. All such statements were copied across into a separate file. Thereafter, all references to age occurring at any points of the documents were copied across into a separate file for later analysis.

## *Analysis*

Discourse analysis could perhaps be best described as the process of examining data from an analytic viewpoint, instead of being the application of well tried and tested methods as in experimental approaches. In the words of Wetherell and Potter (1992: 101) '(m)uch of the work of discourse analysis is a craft skill, something like bicycle riding or chicken sexing that is not easy to render or describe in an explicit or codified manner'. I have already set out at the beginning of this chapter the analytic perspective adopted for use in the present study and its concern with the action orientation of language as well as the resources drawn upon by participants in the interactions studied here. In applying this perspective to the data here, the analysis proceeded through three main phases.

First of these, was the search in the data for patterns of consistency and variation. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) observe, the initial obstacle to overcome in discourse analysis is a tendency to read material for gist, a tendency encouraged in much social science research. While identification of features shared across accounts is both useful and necessary, it is the variation which can provide the key to the occasions on which different formulations are used and the functions served by each



form of account. Variation in the present accounts occurred in many places. For example, the jobseekers who were interviewed proposed many positive views when they were asked about older workers in general. In relation to their own experiences however, their accounts were generally more negative, displaying a defensive orientation to questions on this topic. Patterns such this emerged from the data in this first phase and could then be analysed for the occasions of use and possible functions being served.

Second was the identifications of the functions and effects of the forms of accounting found. Here, the analysis was guided by the approach advocated by Widdicombe (1993). Following Drew (1987), Widdicombe (1993: 97) argues that for analytic purposes it is often useful to treat what people say as being in some way a solution to a problem. The aim of analysis then becomes one of identifying the problem and how the statement provided by the participant functions as a solution. In relation to this study, a focus on problems and solutions proved helpful, for instance, in examining the descriptions offered by employers of recruitment practices. Descriptions which at first sight might appear inconclusive were examined for their effects and the difficulties which employers manage to avoid by presenting descriptions in particular terms.

Third, the forms of accounting and their effects were analysed with regard to the resources used. The focus here was on the information that instances of usage of particular resources could provide about these resources themselves. Some forms of accounting, found used only in limited contexts, suggested that the discursive

resource identified might be available only in limited contexts. The shared nature of the discursive resources was also relevant here. Findings of previous use of particular resources by other writers were checked against current uses, often suggesting varying degrees of coherence and availability. Thus, for example, the discursive strategies which were identified from jobseekers' accounts of their experiences, could be checked against strategies identified by other writers. The consistency or lack of consistency with previous findings proved useful in considering the availability of such ways of accounting for personal experiences. At the same time, variation in the resources identified in this study from those found by others led to re-examination of the resources identified.

These three phases were carried out recursively rather than sequentially. Functions identified from the second phase were checked against instances identified in the first phase and the analysis revised if appropriate. Further variations, if found, were examined for their effects. Resources identified in the third phase were compared with instances and functions in earlier phases, and the analysis revised where necessary. This process continued until the analysis accounted for the patterns of similarity and difference found in the data, by which point the functions and effects of the participants' accounts had become evident and the discursive resources available to the participants had become apparent.

In the next chapter I turn to the results of the analysis which was carried out. I begin my examination of age discrimination in current employment by considering the accounts given by those who have been consistently omitted from previous research,

namely older jobseekers. Over the course of the next three chapters, I look at their accounts of current practices in relation to a number of topics. In Chapter Four I start by considering their views of the identities of older workers in general.

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## Chapter four

### Jobseekers and older workers

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#### *Introduction*

As discussed in the last chapter, the views of those on the receiving end of employment practices, namely jobseekers, have commonly been omitted from previous research. In this study, the jobseekers who participated were asked a number of questions about aspects of current employment practices. Over the course of this and the next two chapters, I will consider their responses given during the interviews to specific questions under three general topics. In the two chapters to come, I will look at their responses to questions about their own experiences of looking for work and questions about the current practices of employers. Here I will begin my examination of older jobseekers' accounts of current employment by considering the views they offer of older workers in general.

## ***Describing differences between older and younger workers***

On the topic of the characteristics or possible characteristics of older workers in general, questions ranged from the general to the specific. Some questions sought views on general differences between workers of different ages and others asked for responses to the possible attribution to older workers of commonly assumed negative characteristics. One question to each participant, in the early part of the interview, was whether he or she thought that there were differences between older and younger workers in general. Two forms of response to this question were identified, one an attribution of qualities to older workers, and two a description of the biases held by others.

### ***Attributing positive qualities to older workers***

In their responses a number of interviewees attribute positive qualities to older workers, for example:

#### ***Extract 4.1***

CM: Do you think that in general there are differences between workers say over 40 and younger people?

IC: Well, depending on the sort of person u:m sort of jobs you've obviously had in the past (.) u:m (.) you are likely to be more reliable (.) u:m more consistent (.) u:m (.) There's all sorts of (.) u:m not really the word I'm looking for virtues, if you like which come with age.

#### ***Extract 4.2***

CM: Do you think that in general there are differences between workers say over 40 and younger people?

GRE: A:h (.) probably a lot of (.) they probably know what they're talking about (.) Your experience, you get experience through life (.) even if you dinnae want to you know (.) maybe the (.) the older worker maybe 'll turn up more often like (.) They're less likely to (.) go to the pub the night before and get really blotto and (.) no bother going into their work (.) They're careful about what they're up to.

*Extract 4.3*

CM: Do you think in general there are differences between older workers and younger workers?

JN: I think older workers (.) I mean in a general way are probably more tolerant and more easy-going (.) They haven't got (.) maybe the ambition that some of the younger ones or the impatience (.) of some of them um (.) and that that's as it should be really as you gain more experience in life and the things that fazed you once are not going to faze you now . . . I think they're probably an asset an asset in a lot of (.) work areas you know w- anything to do with (.) relationships I think they're much better (.) and that's only to do with age, it's not to do with they're superior beings or something.

In Extracts 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 none of the interviewees immediately responds that there are differences between older and younger workers. Each of the speakers though in the course of the response attributes to older workers various qualities. These qualities, namely that older workers are 'more reliable', 'more consistent' and have 'all sorts of . . . virtues' (Extract 4.1), that they will 'turn up more often' and are 'careful about what they're up to' (Extract 4.2), and that they are 'more tolerant and more easy-going' (Extract 4.3) are moreover all characteristics relevant to employment.

The qualities described in each case are attributed by way of a contrast between older workers and younger workers. In Extracts 4.1 and 4.2 this contrast is implicit, although the use of relative terms ('more', 'less') and references to age or age-related descriptions ('age', 'older worker') suggest it is a contrast between younger and older workers. In Extract 4.3 the contrast is explicit with direct reference to the

comparison group of 'some of the younger ones'. The description of qualities of older workers relative to other workers by each interviewee constitutes a claim for the advantages of older workers as a group in relation to employment.

Two other points should be noted here. Firstly, all of the interviewees avoid aligning themselves with the category to which the qualities are being attributed. The qualities proposed by each interviewee are proposed not for a group which includes himself or herself but instead for a more general group, 'you' in Extract 4.1, 'you' and 'they' in Extract 6.2 and 'older workers' in Extract 6.3. Secondly, in each response the qualities of the older worker are proposed in terms which provide for exceptions. '(D)epending on the sort of person', 'probably a lot of' and 'I mean in a general way are probably' all allow for the possibility that there may be workers who do not match the description which is being proposed. Both the non-inclusion of themselves in the descriptions and the provision for exceptional cases reduce the scope for any potential challenge to the claims being made.

By not aligning themselves with the group under description and by qualifying the range of their attributions, the speakers here attend to particular interactional difficulties. IC, GRE and JN, like all other participants, were recruited for the present study on the basis that they were aged over 40 and signing on as unemployed at local jobcentres. They accordingly would appear to be older jobseekers. As such, these interviewees might have a 'stake' or interest in claiming employment related qualities for a group of which they are potentially members. However, as Edwards and Potter (1992) observe, any claims made for themselves

would be open to challenge on precisely those grounds. Were any of the interviewees above to include themselves in the group under description, the attribution of qualities to that group would be susceptible to challenge of the sort 'they would say that, wouldn't they', as frequently noted elsewhere (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996b). By not aligning himself or herself with the description provided each speaker introduces some distance from the group in which he or she might have an interest. At the same time, the use of qualified terms reduces any scope for possible challenge in terms of specific information.

In each case the claims for the qualities of older workers are further protected from challenge by a third element. The attribution of qualities to older workers relative to others in each response implies also the lack of such qualities in the contrast group. Leaving the contrast group implicit instead of making an explicit comparison, in Extracts 4.1 and 4.2, allows IC and GRE to provide a description which makes no mention of workers who may be less qualified. Their descriptions consequently are less likely to be contested than would be the case if disadvantages were to be attributed to others.

Where however the contrast group is made explicit, in Extract 4.3, JN attends to the possibility of challenge in a different way. Here her description includes the attribution of qualities not just to older workers, as in Extracts 4.1 and 4.2, but also to the contrast group, namely 'some of the younger ones'. To this group she attributes two characteristics, namely 'ambition' and 'impatience'. This explicit comparison performs two functions for JN. First, it allows her to attribute to younger



workers a characteristic usually considered advantageous for employment, 'ambition', suggesting that her response is balanced in recognising this quality. Secondly though, the restriction of the attribution to 'some' younger workers suggests that it is not a characteristic in which older workers are necessarily disadvantaged in comparison with younger workers as a group. Additionally, any advantage it might confer on other workers is potentially downgraded by the subsequent attribution of a negative characteristic, namely 'impatience'. However, attributing a positive quality to younger workers even in qualified terms does allow JN to be heard as offering a balanced view of the merits of workers of different ages. Her final evaluation that older workers are 'probably . . . an asset in a lot of (.) work areas you know w- anything to do with (.) relationships I think they're much better' when compared to younger workers is thus presented not as a self-interested claim but as the conclusion of a balanced and considered comparison of the merits of the older and younger workers.

A final point to note in Extracts 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 is the basis offered for the claims made by these interviewees. In each case the claim is based explicitly on age itself. Age is proposed firstly as the sole explanation for the qualities attributed to older workers. IC attributes virtues to 'age' with no expansion or further explanation being provided, while GRE refers to 'life' and offers the age-related description of 'the older worker'. Age as sufficient explanation in itself is indeed emphasised by JN in Extract 4.3, in dismissing the potential alternative explanation that 'it's not to do with they're superior beings or something'. Secondly, age is offered as a seemingly natural and matter-of-fact explanation for the qualities which are

attributed to older workers, evident in the statements that 'virtues . . . come with age' in Extract 4.1 and 'that's only to do with age' in Extract 4.3. As noted by other writers (e.g. Barthes, 1977; Potter, 1996b; Wetherell and Potter, 1989) the construction of a factor as natural and outwith the sphere of human intervention is a powerful means of legitimating its role as an explanation. Here, the deployment of age as a causal mechanism outwith human control provides for each claim a basis which is removed from challenge. Such a role for age is indeed made explicit by GRE in Extract 4.2 who states that 'you get experience through life (.) even if you dinnae want to you know'. Age, it is suggested, brings about changes in personal experience, even counter to the desires of the individual.

These two aspects of interviewees' use of age, as sufficient explanation in itself and as an apparently natural explanation, point to its ready availability as a discursive resource which is drawn upon by the interviewees in these extracts. By the use of age here as the basis for attributing qualities to older workers in comparison with younger workers, the claims made for them as a group and possession of the qualities proposed become legitimated.

In response then to the question of whether there are differences in general between older and younger workers, each of the interviewees above attributes to older workers in general employment-related qualities. The use of age makes these advantages exclusive to older workers. At the same time, the qualities described are presented as being self-explanatory and apparently natural characteristics of older workers.

### *Describing the biases of others*

When asked about differences between workers of different ages, not all interviewees however respond with claims for qualities, as seen below:

#### *Extract 4.4*

CM: Do you think that in general there are differences between workers say over 40 and younger people?

SC: With some employers there is, aye, I suppose an older person's looked upon as somebody who's not, who'll not be as (.) in some cases as strong as a younger person, but then again they might be.

In Extract 4.4, SC instead of providing his own view of differences between workers of different ages offers a view held by others, namely 'some employers'. The basis of this view is claimed to be a comparison of older and younger workers in relation to one specified characteristic, that of strength. This comparison, which it is claimed is made by some employers, places older workers at a possible disadvantage. The extent of the disadvantage is however offered in heavily qualified terms, here 'I suppose' and 'in some cases'. In addition any disadvantage is tentatively challenged by SC who argues that 'they might be [as strong]'. Accordingly the response functions as a claim that others are biased against older workers alongside a possible challenge to such a view.

The suggestion that other people regard younger workers more favourably than older workers is not restricted to employers, as seen in Extract 4.5:

*Extract 4.5*

CM: Do you think in general there are differences between (.) someone younger who's looking for work and someone say over 40?

JHA: I think we're a very youth oriented society, because they use words like dynamism, go-getters, e:h, great career prospects, e:h (.) carve out a career for yourself. At my age, I've only got seven years before I get to my retirement, (.) and I've got through the illusion of dynamism.

JHA here describes a bias which is said to extend beyond employers to 'society'. This time the view attributed to others is described not as disadvantaging older people but rather as favouring younger ones, in her reference to society as being 'youth oriented'. JHA makes explicit the line of reasoning which has led her to such a conclusion ('I think . . . because') and sets out the evidence on which it is based. This evidence comprises the language used in relation to job recruitment, in the form of terms such as 'dynamism, go-getters, e:h, great career prospects, e:h (.) carve out a career for yourself'. The description of preference and the displayed reasoning which is provided in support of her conclusion both function as a claim that younger people are favoured over older people with regard to recruitment.

To the described bias in favour of younger people JHA, like SC above, offers a challenge in qualified terms. One of the recruitment descriptors provided earlier, 'dynamism', is argued to be an 'illusion', suggesting that it has no substantive basis. JHA though offers no further comment on any of the other descriptions which have been suggested as favouring younger people. Again, the response functions as a

claim that other people are biased against older people combined with a partial rejection of the basis of any such view.

A further point to note, in relation to both Extract 4.4 and Extract 4.5, is that again both SC and JHA avoid aligning themselves with the group being described. SC refers to the group being described in a general way by the use of 'an older person' and 'they'. JHA avoids any mention of the disadvantaged group by describing those who are claimed to be advantaged in relation to employment rather than the reverse. Similarly to IC, GRE and JN above, the speakers here clearly each have an interest in the claims which are being made. Any direct complaint that others are unfairly biased against a group which includes themselves could easily be heard as a product of stake and open to challenge accordingly. Non-alignment with the disadvantaged group, together with the use of qualification in the challenges made, again function to present each claim as a reasonable response rather than simply a self-interested assertion.

While neither SC nor JHA offers age as the basis of a claim for qualities of older workers, both responses nonetheless display an orientation to age as an explanation for differences between groups of workers. Both interviewees describe biases on the part of others resulting from age itself, no other explanation or detail being provided. That age might be used by others in such ways appears comprehensible to the interviewees, even if unwarranted. SC and JHA indeed draw upon this availability of age in imputing to others these very biases. Although not proposed here as the

basis of any differences, age again is widely available in the context of employment in making sense of the characteristics of older workers in relation to others.

In responding to the question asked, none of the interviewees claim that there are no differences between older and younger workers. All either offer age as the basis of a claim for characteristics of older workers which make them better qualified than younger workers as potential employees, or orient to age as the basis of the negative biases of others against older workers which are then challenged.

### ***Responding to negative attributions***

In order to look further at the ways in which they describe older workers, following the responses above the interviewees were asked about possible negative characteristics of older workers. Specifically, they were asked to react to three of the negative characteristics of older workers most commonly suggested by previous studies of the views of employers, such as those discussed in Chapter Two. These suggestions were (1) that older workers are more prone to ill-health and are in consequence likely to require more time off work than younger people, (2) that they are slower than younger workers to learn new skills required in employment, and (3) that they fit in less easily to the culture of existing organisations.

From the participants' responses, five different ways of reacting to negative attributions were identified. These comprised the following: (1) making no explicit comment; (2) minimising application of the attribution; (3) rejecting the relevance of

age; (4) claiming that older workers are better, and (5) rejecting age and claiming an advantage.

### *(1) Making no explicit comment*

A first type of response to a suggestion of a negative characteristic involved making no explicit comment on the suggestion contained in the question, for instance:

#### *Extract 4.6*

CM: Or there's another suggestion that's sometimes made that older people (.) won't fit in so easily to an established company culture or business (.)

JHA: I agree with that, I agree with that, though. This is the thing about being less malleable . . . as you are, have had your own experiences and it's no longer theory, it's true experience (.) for you.

When asked about one potential negative attribution, namely that older workers will not easily fit in to an existing organisational culture, JHA initially emphasises her agreement in stating 'I agree with that, I agree with that, though'. It soon becomes apparent however that this is not agreement with the suggestion put to her. JHA instead reformulates the characteristic with which she agrees from being one of a relative difficulty in fitting in to an organisation to being 'the thing about being less malleable'. It is consequently agreed that older workers differ from younger ones in respect of this characteristic of malleability rather than the one suggested to her. Her agreement is then further emphasised after the reformulation ('it's no longer theory, it's true experience (.) for you').

The basis of JHA's attribution of this reformulated characteristic to older workers is here explicitly stated to be 'experiences'. Implicitly therefore the relative lack of malleability of older workers is not a consequence of age itself.

In agreeing with an alternative difference between older and younger workers, JHA here neither accepts nor challenges the characteristic suggested, that older workers will have greater difficulty than younger ones in fitting in to an organisation. The reformulation of the attribute suggested to her and her agreement with the reformulation allow JHA to respond to the interviewer's question without making any explicit comment upon the described characteristic.

Other responses avoid commenting on the suggested characteristic by describing employers' practices, as follows:

*Extract 4.7*

CM: Another suggestion sometimes made is that [older workers] won't fit easily to an established company culture, an organisation that's been going for some time. How would you react to that?

SC: Well, an employer will tell you that it's his right to choose and whether I say that I agree that he should have an older workforce or a younger workforce, at the end of the day they will, they will decide and that workforce will carry on in that.

SC, similarly to JHA, responds to the question without reference to the attribute suggested to him. This is accomplished by offering a view of the operation of employers' practices in general in stating 'they will decide and the workforce will



carry on in that' and of how a hypothetical employer would justify these in terms of 'his right to choose'. Against this background, SC argues that such employment practices will persist 'whether I say that I agree' and that his own opinions will have no impact on employers. SC, by offering an employer's view of current practices and dismissing the relevance of his opinion to these, also avoids making any comment upon the characteristic suggested to him in the question.

By offering then either a reformulated characteristic or by providing an employer's view of practices and justifications, both JHA and SC are able to respond to the question without either accepting or challenging the negative characteristic proposed.

## *(2) Minimising application of the attribution*

While the speakers above do not comment on the attribution put to them in the question, other interviewees do react to such suggestions. A second type of response which was identified centred on qualification of the negative characteristic, as can be seen in the extracts below:

### *Extract 4.8*

CM: What about the suggestion that [older workers] will be slower at picking up new skills in any element of retraining that's involved?

JHA: That's absolutely true, I (.) I agree with that, e::m, but I don't agree that they can't, I just think that they need more time learning new skills as you get older.

Similarly to the response in Extract 4.6, JHA here initially emphasises her agreement by stating '(t)hat's absolutely true, I (.) I agree with that'. In this case, her agreement refers to the characteristic suggested by the question, which is rephrased within her response that 'they need more time learning new skills as you get older'. She explicitly resists however any further inference suggested by the question in arguing that 'I don't agree that they can't'. In explicitly agreeing with the proposed attribution to older workers while rejecting any further inference, JHA's response functions to minimise the suggested disadvantage of older workers. At the same time, JHA explicitly provides age alone as the basis for differences in workers in relation to the suggested characteristic.

While JHA rejects any extension of the suggested attribution, other interviewees minimise its application by restricting the skills to which the characteristic might apply. For example:

*Extract 4.9*

- CM: What about the suggestion that older workers will be slower at picking up new skills in any element of retraining that's involved?
- IC: Depends on what sort of skills you're talking about u:m (.) If it's coming to grips with (.) a okay let's come back to (.) to jolly old computers, if it's coming to grips with Microsoft or whatever (.) u:m I know I could do it. If it comes down to something as practical as typing (.) then I could (.) because getting to grips with something like a computer is potentially up there, it's in your head.

*Extract 4.10*

- CM: What about the suggestion that [older workers] will be slower at picking up new skills in any element of retraining that's involved?
- PO: I'd imagine there is some justification in that, yes (.) depending on the new skills and what you're looking for, if it's dexterity and movement and (.) what have you (.) yeah I could see that (.) e:m there would be (.) a slowness in that area.

In Extracts 4.9 and 4.10 both IC and PO also qualify the attribution suggested to them. Here the qualifications relate to the application of the characteristic. Instead of accepting or rejecting the suggested characteristic, each interviewee responds in terms which make the attribution to older workers of a slowness in learning new skills contingent upon the skills being described ('d)epends on what sort of skills you're talking about' (Extract 4.9), 'depending on the new skills and what you're looking for' (Extract 4.10)).

Each interviewee then describes skills to which the attribution would either be applicable or not be applicable. IC in Extract 4.9 provides an example, that of computers, of skills to which the attribution of a slowness in learning new skills would not apply. The choice of computers as an example here is particularly pertinent: older workers are often regarded as being slow to learn the skills associated with industrial advances (see e.g. Campbell, 1999; Warr and Pennington, 1993) and are often viewed as technophobic. Computers however are commonly seen as requiring specific up-to-date skills. The use of this example consequently emphasises the inapplicability of the suggested attribution. This example of skills to which a slowness in learning would not apply is then widened out to other skills such as 'something as practical as typing' and 'something like a computer'. PO, in contrast, in Extract 4.10 describes circumstances in which the attribution of the characteristic of a relative slowness would apply, namely 'if it's dexterity and movement'. In giving this example though, rather than widening the range of description he subsequently narrows it down to 'that area', suggesting that a

slowness to learn new skills applies only in a restricted range of circumstances. The description of irrelevant skills which are generalised, or relevant skills which are narrowed, serves in each case to minimise the range of applicability of the proposed negative attribute.

By making the applicability of the suggested slowness to learn new skills contingent upon the skills being described, and minimising the range of skills to which the attribution would be applicable, both IC and PO qualify the suggested attribution of this negative characteristic to older workers. That neither rejects the proposed attribute outright, and both allow for the possibility of circumstances where it might be applicable, suggests again that total rejection of this age-related characteristic might not be easy to negotiate. The role of age is however left implicit in each response. As in Extract 4.8 then, one way of responding to such negative attributions to older workers is qualification of the attribution rather than either explicit acceptance or rejection.

In the three extracts above the responses function to minimise the application of the attribute which has been suggested. This is achieved either by rejecting the inference that the disadvantage of older workers goes further than suggested, or by restricting the skills to which it might apply.

### *(3) Rejecting the relevance of age*

In none of the extracts considered this far has the interviewee challenged the attribution which was suggested. Where the participants do challenge the suggested characteristics, one means of challenge is to reject the relevance of age. For example:

#### *Extract 4.11*

CM: Older workers are often portrayed more negatively than younger people in various sorts of ways, for example that they're more likely to be prone to ill health and are likely to take more time off work as a result of that. How would you react to these sorts of suggestions?

HF: I'd have to look at the statistics on that to, to see and try and work out who's (.) got these statistics and how and (.) why they've done it and this kind of thing, to find out whether they've, you know, how they've loaded the (.) their angle it in, e:m (.) I mean, young people get ill just the same (.) I mean, why should that be, because you're older, you're iller?

In Extract 4.11, HF questions the truth of the attribution suggested to her, this time that older workers are more likely to be ill and will as a consequence require more time off work, asking explicitly 'why should that be, because you're older, you're iller?'. She argues that the 'statistics', which implicitly give rise to a negative view of older workers, have been 'loaded' against them and thus give a misleading picture of the situation. Moreover, HF suggests that this has been done intentionally ('why') in the interests or 'angle' of those who present such a view. As a result of this questioning and discrediting of any supporting evidence, the negative characteristic proposed for older workers becomes no more than an unsupported and biased suggestion put about by others. HF's response thus functions as a rejection of

the suggestion that older workers are more likely than younger workers to suffer from ill-health.

In Extracts 4.12 and 4.13, the interviewees reject the relevance of age is by referring to people other than older workers who are claimed to have the attribute suggested.

*Extract 4.12*

CM: Another suggestion that's you know sometimes put about is that (.) older people will fit in less easily into an established company culture (.) what would you say to that?

JHE: E:m, I don't think that's necessarily true, I think one of the things that (.) another idea that's kind of (.) thrown around is that, you know, can't have older people because they won't want to take, you know, orders from (.) e:m younger people. (.) I don't think that's necessarily (.) I don't think that's true actually, e:h, necessarily, I'm not saying there isn't the odd person who's gonna be like that anyway, you know, but they're gonna be like that anyway, you know, they're gonna be like that anyway, they are, whether they're at work or not.

*Extract 4.13*

CM: What about the suggestion that as people get older they're slower to pick up new skills?

AR: I think that's absolute nonsense to be honest with you. E:m, if I just again use my example with the, the, the (.) young people with computers and things like that, I mean they took the same time as far as I could see to pick it up, mm (.) and get over their fear of it or their feeling of, you know, what happens if I press this, you know, the thing will crash and all this stuff, as anybody else as far as I could see, that I was dealing with (.) and I don't see why that shouldn't be the case in all kinds of situations.

JHE above, like HF in Extract 4.11, immediately questions the basis of the proposed attribution in arguing that it is not 'necessarily true' and 'another idea that's kind of (.) thrown around'. Both arguments suggest that the characteristic described again has no substantive basis to it. They are however provided in terms which indicate a considered rather than a direct rejection of the suggestion. JHE then argues that the

attribute included in the question is not applicable to older workers as a group and that it instead is applicable only to 'the odd person who's gonna be like that anyway'. Attributing the disadvantage to particular individuals suggests that it should not be regarded as a characteristic which is related to age and that it is not applicable to older workers in general. The qualified terms of JHE's initial rejection together with the vagueness of this example both make this claim difficult to undermine with specific information. Her response accordingly rejects the attribution on the grounds that age is irrelevant.

AR in Extract 4.13 also begins by rejecting the characteristic suggested to him, namely that older people are slower to learn new skills in arguing that 'I think that's absolute nonsense to be honest with you'. In support of this claim, AR gives an example which appears to contradict the suggestion originally made. The example provided relates specifically to AR's personal experience of one particular situation, namely that of 'young people with computers'. By reference to his own experience of this situation, AR claims that '[young people] took the same time as far as I could see to pick it up . . . and get over their fear of it'. According to AR, younger workers had abilities which were no greater than those of others in that context and implicitly older people were no slower in learning the necessary skills.

As in Extract 4.9, the use of computers appears especially relevant here as an example. The claim that younger people are no quicker than others in learning new skills, in a situation where they are commonly assumed to have an advantage,

provides the basis for AR's direct rejection of the initial suggestion. Again the relevance of age to the attribution suggested is rejected.

One way then of challenging negative attributions to older workers is to reject the relevance of age to the characteristic which is proposed. Other interviewees however argue that age is relevant, as seen in the following section.

#### *(4) Claiming older workers are better*

Another means of challenging a negative characteristic is to claim that age gives older workers an advantage over younger workers, as in the following extracts:

##### *Extract 4.14*

- CM: How do you feel about the suggestion that that older workers are more likely to be prone to ill-health and will require more time off work as a result?
- PO: Mm (.) well I I wouldn't agree with that one because e:m (.) I've seen more youngsters being off work (.) more often (.) e:m I wouldn't say through ill-health it's (.) they feel ill and what have you but it's (.) brought upon themselves and such like (.) Older people (.) e:m (.) my experience is well I can only talk about what I've seen (CM: yes) the older guys are there even when they're not so well.

##### *Extract 4.15*

- CM: It's also often suggested that older workers are more likely to be prone to ill-health and are likely to need more time off work as a result of that. How would you react to that suggestion?
- JG: I think, e:::h, I think, e::h, studies have shown that e::h, younger people tend to take more time off work than older people. I'm not sure if, what you said there holds that amount of water, (CM: right) you see what I'm saying, it's maybe suggested that because people are older, that they come down with more illnesses and eh, therefore take more time off work, in saying that I think employers should look at that possibility, but I think as the information I got, that e::h, that that's not true, that young people have been found to take more time off work than older people.



PO and JG, after initial hesitation each also reject the attribution suggested to ('(m)m (.) well I I wouldn't agree with that one' (Extract 4.14), 'I'm not sure if, what you said there holds that amount of water' (Extract 4.15)). Each interviewee thereafter claims that the proposed attribute is more applicable to younger workers than to older workers. PO claims that 'I've seen more youngsters being off work' and that 'the older guys are there even when they're not so well'. Similarly, JG states that 'young people have been found to take more time off work'. The attribution of the negative characteristic to younger workers, in contrast to older workers, thus in each case constitutes a claim for the advantages of older workers over younger workers as employees in relation to the characteristic described.

Resisting the suggestion by means of an attribution of positive qualities to older workers raises again the question of interest in the claim which is being proposed. Here the interviewees avoid aligning themselves with the group being described, as noted with regard to earlier extracts above (Extracts 4.1 to 4.3) when claims were made for the relative qualities of older workers. Again, the group to which the advantage is being attributed is described in terms which do not explicitly include the interviewee but refer instead to 'older guys' (Extract 6.14) and 'older people' (Extract 6.15). In each case, the non-inclusion of the speaker in the description serves to distance him from the claim which is made.

Both interviewees then build up the facticity of their claims. For PO in Extract 6.14, his claim is based on circumstances within his personal knowledge in that 'my experience is well I can only talk about what I've seen'. The argument here that the

evidence in support of the claim is easily visible, not just to PO himself but potentially also to others, suggests that it has status beyond his own views and interpretations. Rather, the supporting evidence is externalised and claimed to be 'out there', in Potter's (1996b) terms. JG in Extract 6.15 accomplishes the facticity of his claim in a different way. That younger people take more time off work is stated to be first, something which 'studies have shown', and second to be supported by 'the information' JG has in his possession. The effect of these different descriptions is to suggest that they are separate sources of evidence in support of the claim, rather than alternative descriptions of the same source. As a result, they indicate some sort of corroboration or consensus as to the truth of the statement being made (Potter, 1996b). As a result, the claim again is presented as being objective, in being supported by evidence from different sources and distanced from JG himself. Given this claim for greater support, his claim would consequently require more work to undermine.

As a consequence of being distanced from the interviewees themselves and their personal views, the claims become robust to challenge. In the two extracts above therefore, the initial hesitation of the interviewees, their non-alignment with the advantaged group and the constructed facticity of the claims all function to suggest that each claim is a reasonable conclusion based on the available evidence. It should however be noted that the interviewees provide no explanation as to why younger workers and older workers differ in respect of this attribute. Instead the attribution relies solely on the age-related descriptions used. Nonetheless, the characteristic of

ill-health and requiring time off work, far from being a shortcoming of older workers in employment, becomes a disadvantage of younger workers.

#### *(5) Rejecting age and claiming an advantage*

Rejecting the relevance of age and claiming that older workers have an advantage over younger workers thus offer two ways of resisting the possible attribution of negative characteristics. These two forms of challenge are not mutually exclusive, as can be seen in the following extracts:

##### *Extract 4.16*

CM: Older workers are often portrayed more negatively than younger people in various sorts of ways, for example that they're more likely to be prone to ill health and are likely to take more time off work as a result of that. How would you react to these sorts of suggestions?

JHA: S'cuse me. E::m, no I don't think that's true. I think if you're a healthy person, you're a healthy person. I don't think that's true at all. (.) And let's be honest, younger people probably have more late nights than the older people do for a start, they're more concerned about their health so they look after it better.

##### *Extract 4.17*

CM: Often older people are portrayed more negatively than younger workers in different sorts of ways (.) How would you react for instance to the suggestion that they're more prone to ill health and they're more likely to require time off work?

JC: I mean really it really does depend on the person (.) u:m. I know, I know (.) a couple of people of sixty who still go jogging (CM: uh huh) I've never done never mind being fifty and stopping it (*laughing*) I've never done it. Seems totally insane to me u:m (.) On the other hand (.) they may have more ill-health (.) they may (.) but in situations of minor ill-health they are still more likely to turn up at the office (.) Certainly in u:m (.) in my previous lives (.) u:m I found that (.) u:m (.) come snowstorms or whatever (.) it's been the fifty year old who's turned up (.) and the junior typist who's phoned in and said 'I can't get to work today'. U:m could be unfair on her but (.) that's basically the situation.

JHA and JC above both argue that the characteristic suggested to them is an individual one rather than one related to age. In Extract 4.16 an initial explicit rejection of the suggestion is followed by a claim that the characteristic suggested is properly applicable on an individual basis ('I don't think that's true. I think if you're a healthy person, you're a healthy person'). JC in Extract 4.17 makes the attribution initially contingent upon the individual and follows this with a description of two people to whom it would not apply ('it really does depend on the person . . . I know (.) a couple of people of sixty who still go jogging'). This description, of older people who carry out an activity which implicitly is inconsistent with an attribution of ill health, reinforces her initial claim that the attribution is applicable only to individuals. In each case, the proposed characteristic is rejected on the grounds that age is irrelevant.

The claim that age is irrelevant is followed in each case by a claim that older workers are more reliable than younger workers. JHA in Extract 4.16 prefaces this claim with 'let's be honest', suggesting that the validity of what is to follow is obvious both to the interviewee and the interviewer. In Extract 4.17, JC softens her initial rejection of the original characteristic, moderating the tone of the claim to follow ('they may have more ill-health (.) they may').

The claim is then in each case proposed by a way of a contrast between the actions of older workers and younger workers. JHA in Extract 4.16 argues that 'younger people probably have more late nights than the older people do for a start', leading her to claim that 'they're more concerned about their health so they look after it

better'. In Extract 4.17, JC claims that 'in situations of minor ill-health they are still more likely to turn up at the office'. In support of her claim she contrasts her previous experience of older and younger workers, arguing that 'come snowstorms or whatever (.) it's been the fifty year old who's turned up (.) and the junior typist who's phoned in and said 'I can't get to work today'.

Whereas in Extract 4.16 JHA's claim is legitimated by an appeal to truth as noted above, the claim in Extract 4.17 is legitimated in two ways. Firstly, the reference to experience suggests that the evidence of this example is available not just to JC but also to others. Secondly, the example of extreme weather conditions ('snowstorms or whatever') represents an 'extreme case formulation' (Pomerantz, 1986). The use here of such an extreme description strengthens the persuasiveness of JC's claim that older workers can be relied upon to turn up at work and thus legitimates the claim. In addition to being legitimated in these ways, the claim is further protected by JHA's subsequent qualification 'could be unfair on her'. This allows for possible exceptions to the description offered and in so doing attends to the possibility of the claim being undermined by any contrary information being produced.

As with earlier claims for qualities of older workers, neither speaker here aligns herself with the group which is being described. Each speaker instead refers to the group in general terms, namely 'older people' and 'they' in Extract 4.16, and 'they' and 'the fifty year old' in Extract 4.17. Again non-alignment with the category being described, together with the legitimation given in each case for the claim being

made, accordingly presents each response as a reasonable claim for the qualities of older workers.

The basis of the claims in Extracts 4.16 and 4.17 for the qualities of older workers lies in the differences in actions of older and younger workers. These claims explicitly are not founded on age itself. No explanation however is provided for the differences in actions suggested, those of looking after one's health or turning up for work. Rather these claimed differences are proposed simply on the basis of the age-related descriptions used: 'younger people' and 'older people' in Extract 4.16, 'the fifty year old' and 'the junior typist' in Extract 4.17. That age should lead to such differences in health concerns or work reliability is treated as self-explanatory. Implicitly therefore it underpins the claims which are made.

In claiming initially that the characteristic is an individual one and thereafter claiming an advantage for older workers, JHA and JC in Extracts 4.16 and 4.17 both resist and draw upon age in responding to the attribution contained in the question. To find these different orientations to age in the course of a single response, used apparently unproblematically, suggests that in addition to being a powerful explanatory resource as seen in earlier extracts age is also an extremely flexible one. Open to challenge as irrelevant at one point, it remains readily available for subsequent deployment such as in a claim for differences advantageous to employment. As a result, it makes available to the present interviewees a versatile resource for making sense of the position and characteristics of older workers in current employment.

## ***Discussion***

The characteristics of older workers then, described by the interviewees, are commonly positive. When asked about possible differences between older and younger workers, many participants attribute to older workers qualities such as consistency (Extract 4.1), reliability (Extract 4.2) and tolerance (Extract 4.3). All the qualities attributed are characteristics which are potentially relevant to employment and which give older workers an advantage in relation to younger ones. Any speakers who not make such attributions respond by disputing the biases of others, namely some employers or society, against older workers. None of the interviewees claim that there are no differences between workers of different ages.

The interviewees were specifically asked to respond to suggestions of other possible characteristics of older workers, characteristics often attributed to them also solely on the basis of age. When the interviewees are asked about such negative attributions suggested by much previous research, they respond in several ways. In some cases they make no explicit comment on the original suggestions, while in other cases they minimise the application of the attribution by rejecting any further inference or by restricting the range of application. Where the suggested attributions are challenged, these challenges take two forms. One means of challenge is to argue that age is irrelevant to possession of the characteristic. Another means of challenge is to claim that the difference suggested in fact favours older rather than younger workers, again placing them more favourably in relation to employment. Finally, as

seen, these two forms of challenge can be combined to resist the attribution of any shortcoming while at the same time claiming employment advantages for the older worker.

One less apparent aspect of the extracts considered above is the question of the occasions on which the different forms of response are deployed. All interviewees provide different forms of response on different occasions. JHA, for example, makes no explicit comment in relation to the difficulty of fitting in to an organisational culture (Extract 4.6) but challenges the suggestion that older workers are more prone to ill health and require more time off work (Extract 4.16). PO similarly qualifies the suggestion of slowness in learning skills (Extract 4.10) while also challenging the proposed attribution of poorer health and absence from work (Extract 4.14).

The variation in responses provided and the challenges on two different grounds both suggest that the forms of response which have been identified provide a range of resources available to the interviewees for responding to possible negative attributions. In the descriptions of characteristics of older workers, the resource most commonly used by the interviewees as an explanation for differences is age itself. Age can in these responses be seen as a flexible and powerful resource, available in a range of situations for deployment when required. Where it is deployed by the interviewees to claim advantages for older workers, either in claiming qualities or in challenging suggested attributions, no further explanation or expansion is offered. When age is proposed as the basis of the views of others or of shortcomings attributed to older workers, it often meets with no explicit challenge or with



qualification rather than direct challenge. Only where age is rejected as irrelevant is its power as a causal explanation directly challenged. At the same time age remains available for other use even within the course of the same responses. Its power and persistence are thus evident.

Less apparent however is the relevance of the descriptions offered above to the interviewees themselves. Throughout the responses examined in this chapter, the interviewees avoid aligning themselves with the category under description. While non-alignment and the qualifications common in the responses function to provide distance between these speakers and their claims, they also bring into question the very identities of these participants.

Previous writers have argued that speakers in interactions commonly resist being ascribed identities or membership of social groups where the identities in question are problematic and carry with them negative inferences. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995), for example, in their study of youth subcultures note that their participants resisted being ascribed membership of particular categories. At stake for these interviewees was the issue of authenticity: simply to accept the ascription available of say 'punk' would have put in doubt the status of membership of the category. The interviewee might have appeared to be someone who followed fashion or the actions of others, instead being a person who held a deep commitment to their individual identity. As a result, the participants would characterise appearance, behaviour in the form of musical preference and other factors as matters of personal choice and identity rather than as resulting from any more superficial motive or by group

membership. By use of a range of discursive strategies, the interviewees resisted the identity in question and the inferences which went with it.

In a re-examination of interview data obtained from other studies, Antaki and Rapley (1999) arrive at a similar conclusion in relation to the category of being 'learning disabled'. Within these data, the participants would commonly avoid mention of the category of learning disabled or deny that it applied to them. Such avoidance and denials were interpreted by the original writers as evidence that the mentally handicapped interviewees were ignorant of their own condition. Antaki and Rapley argue that, instead of being treated as evidence of ignorance, such statements by the interviewees can more usefully be viewed as the sorts of discursive strategies which anyone might show in relation to the ascription of a highly problematic identity. In relation to an identity which carries extremely negative inferences, the question of who is allowed to define it and to ascribe it is of the highest importance. As in Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1995) study above, the interviewees in these previous studies did not accept the category ascription and its accompanying inferences.

Given the ways in which identities are negotiated, resisted and defined within interactions, Widdicombe (1998) argues that identities should be regarded as a participants' rather than an analysts' resource. The aim of analysis is to show how and when the interviewees' make identities relevant to a particular interaction and not for the analyst to impose them upon the data either from the outset or post hoc. In line with this approach, I have noted throughout this chapter that the interviewees

in the present study do not ascribe to themselves at any point the identity of older worker. Although this identity has been continually available, the interviewees have instead distanced themselves from it by non-alignment and the discursive strategies discussed above.

What the present findings suggest is firstly that the category of older worker is problematic, carrying with it negative inferences such as those found in studies of other identities. Secondly, they also suggest that the descriptions considered here can be treated only as the constructions of the identities of others, namely older workers in general. These descriptions cannot in any sense be regarded as synonymous with the identities of the participants themselves. Instead the participants' own characteristics and identities in relation to employment are left entirely open. The question of how they make sense of their own experiences of age and seeking work will be taken up in the next chapter.

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## Chapter five

### Age and individual experience

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#### *Introduction*

In the last Chapter I examined the descriptions of the characteristics of older workers given by the participants in this study. Throughout the descriptions provided, the interviewees make use of and orient to age as a relevant factor in making their claims. The claims made for the qualities of older workers in comparison to younger workers and the responses to possible negative attributions both though make little reference to the interviewees, who distance themselves from the descriptions being offered. I turn in this Chapter to the ways in which the participants make sense of their own experiences, past and present, of looking for employment. Questions on this topic related to changes in their own skills over time, changes in the jobs which for which they apply and whether age had been a factor in their search for work.

## ***Age and personal abilities***

In the responses examined in the last Chapter, many interviewees attributed to older workers in general qualities relevant to employment in comparison with younger workers. Subsequent to their descriptions of proposed qualities for older workers in general, the interviewees were asked whether their own skills and abilities in relation to employment had changed over time. This question met with three types of response, namely those which described unchanged skills, those which minimised reductions in skills and those which claimed increased skills.

### ***Describing unchanged skills***

One form of response identified was a description of skills which were unchanged over time, as follows:

#### ***Extract 5.1***

- CM: Thinking about the skills or abilities that you could offer to an employer, do you think these have changed over the years?
- JHA: I think the natural skills and abilities I've got (.) e::m, are just instinctive in me, but I've never really thought about them as being marketable in that sense. (CM: mm hm) You just be the mother, bringing up children, being adaptable, doing all these sort of things, (.) just automatically do them, but to translate them into, sort of the market, which I (.) the one word I hate, (*laughs*) and it's fundamentally a lack of confidence on my part, (.) it's a lack of confidence.

Asked whether her employment related skills and abilities have changed over time, JHA responds with a description of her skills. These skills are claimed to be 'be(ing)

the mother, bringing up children, being adaptable, doing all these sorts of things'. In addition, 'natural', 'instinctive' and 'automatically' all suggest that the skills described are intrinsic to JHA as an individual. They are thus heard as descriptions of skills which are enduring and not readily susceptible to change over time.

The skills which JHA describes however are not skills necessarily associated with employment. The relevance of the skills to an employer is questioned by JHA herself in stating 'I've never really thought about them as being marketable in that sense'. Her argument that 'to translate them into, sort of the market . . . it's fundamentally a lack of confidence on my part' implies though that these skills could be made relevant to employment by JHA herself. By describing unchanged skills and discussing their relevance to employers, JHA is able to respond to the question without any reference to skills more usually associated with work.

### *Minimising reductions in skills*

In the present study, JHA was the only participant who described skills which were unchanged. All other interviewees referred to skills which had reduced or increased over time. The interviewees in the following extracts minimise reductions in their skills and abilities:

#### *Extract 5.2*

CM: Have the skills and abilities that you can bring to a job, have they changed over the years?

JB: Em u:h skills and abilities. (.) Well having (.) graduated in my (.) later years e:m (.) uh I can show that age is not necessarily em (.) it doesn't necessarily preclude the

intellectual capacity, it doesn't narrow you down and (.) em make you incapable of sustained intellectual thought or study. Having gone through the four years at Un- and then eh (.) successfully graduated um (.) again that helps to keep them sharp such faculties sharp uh. I won't say razor sharp but at least eh (.) not too blunt.

*Extract 5.3*

CM: Do you think that what you could contribute to a new job has changed over the years in terms of skills or abilities?

PO: I feel I'm still very capable of doing (.) e:m some good (.) work (.) e:m. Maybe let down a little bit by eyesight and such like now (.) with the very intricate stuff (.) but basically my job was (.) to take an idea that someone thought up (.) then put it onto paper for others to build (.) and e:m the same with aircraft that had gone down and such like (.) they sent back the parts for refurbished repair and such like (.) and my job was basically I could sit down and say 'yeah the best way to go ahead with this is' and trot out write out a format and say 'right, workshop get get on with it'. You put it through all the correct sequences (.) to do so. So (.) yeah these skills (.) 'll never leave me (.) I shouldn't think (.) until I keel over (*laughing*) but I think yeah I've still got (.) a lot of good things that I could do.

JB and PO above both describe their current abilities in terms that are qualified and which indicate some decline in these abilities. Any reduction in skills though is minimised in each case. This is accomplished in three ways. One, each interviewee in response to the question makes relevant a particular characteristic. JB in Extract 5.2 refers to 'intellectual capacity' while for PO in Extract 5.3 the relevant characteristic is 'eyesight'. Two, the interviewees contrast their current abilities in relation to this characteristic with a description of greater abilities. In Extract 5.2 JB refers to his current intellectual capacities as being 'sharp uh. I won't say razor sharp'. PO in Extract 5.3 states that he is '(m)aybe let down a little bit by eyesight and such like now (.) with the very intricate stuff', implying that in contrast this description is not applicable to other 'stuff'. A third aspect of each response to note here of is that these descriptions of greater abilities suggest, not just some enhancement of the current capabilities of JB and PO, but rather capabilities which

might be considered to be the ideal in evaluative terms. As such, they represent 'extreme case formulations' (Pomerantz, 1986) of the abilities possible in relation to each characteristic.

The effect of such a combination of a contrast and an extreme case formulation is, as noted by McKinlay and Dunnett (1998), to restrict to extreme circumstances the application of any description which is provided. Thus, as found in their study, where a gun-owner displays a willingness to shoot someone, such willingness can be limited to particular circumstances involving intruders rather than indicating a willingness to use guns generally. In the extracts above, the combination of implicit contrast and extreme case formulations functions similarly. Any possible loss of abilities on the part of JB and PO is restricted to extreme or very specialised situations. By limiting any reduction in abilities to situations requiring 'razor sharp' intellectual abilities in Extract 5.2 or 'the very intricate stuff' in Extract 5.3, JB and PO each minimise the extent of changes which might have occurred in their skills and abilities over the years.

The credibility of these claims is built up in each case by reference to the achievements of the speaker. JB in Extract 5.2 cites a recent achievement in 'having graduated in my (.) later years'. The abilities warranted by this achievement are emphasised through the use of a three-part list device, namely that 'it doesn't necessarily preclude the intellectual capacity, it doesn't narrow you down and (.) em make you incapable of sustained intellectual thought or study'. The effect of this formulation is to suggest that all the items within the list display a common feature



and it provides strong rhetorical support for the previous claim (Jefferson, 1991). Here the use of this list emphasises JB's denial of loss of intellectual abilities and provides rhetorical support for his claim that any loss of such abilities is minimal.

PO's claim, in Extract 5.3, similarly is built up by reference to his previous achievements. Here this is accomplished through a detailed description of his previous work and the tasks involved in it. PO's abilities in relation to the work described are also built up by the voicing of 'yeah the best way to go ahead with this is'. This together with the detail given of the work and of the tasks involved implies that the description provided is an accurate recollection of the events described and thus goes to establish the facticity of the warrant (Potter, 1996b). His earlier claim, like that of JB, consequently is more likely to be accepted as a credible account.

A final point to note in the extracts above is the orientation of each speaker. Both JB and PO orient to age as the explanation for changes in skills or abilities in minimising any reductions in their abilities which have occurred over time. In each case the common association of age with decline, although not mentioned in the question put to the interviewees, nonetheless provides a negative focus for the responses.

### *Claiming increased skills*

While JB and PO in Extracts 5.2 and 5.3 orient to a possible reduction in their skills, other participants claim to have skills which have increased over time. For example:

*Extract 5.4*

- CM: Have the skills or abilities that you could contribute to a job changed over the years?
- IC: Oh yes, I mean definitely because a you've got more experience and b u:m (.) having done, if you like, a variety of jobs I've got a wide experience (.) okay mostly administrative but u:m (.) there really are (.) very few management u:m (.) capabilities that I'm not capable of (CM: mm hm) and I couldn't have said that twenty years ago.

In Extract 5.4, IC immediately responds in the affirmative to the question asked, emphasising her answer by the use of 'definitely'. This is followed immediately by an account for the claim. Initially the account is presented in two parts. As the account develops however, both parts refer to the same factor namely 'experience'. The second part thus comes to form an expansion of the description included in the first part, 'experience' being further detailed as 'having done, if you like, a variety of jobs I've got a wide experience'. This description of past experience then provides the basis for IC's subsequent claim that 'there really are (.) very few management capabilities that I'm not capable of'.

The description of present abilities is implicitly contrasted with IC's view of her previous abilities. Her statement that 'I couldn't have said that twenty years ago' implies that her abilities then were fewer than her current abilities. Here the issue of stake serves to support this description. IC has an interest in claiming abilities for herself rather than downgrading them and a description of fewer abilities is difficult to undermine. It is likely to be heard as a credible description and one which is robust to challenge with specific information. The contrast between her abilities at

that time and her description of current abilities thus functions to indicate that IC's abilities have increased over that period.

In Extract 5.5 HF also claims to have abilities which have increased over time. This claim though is offered in a somewhat different form to that above, as follows:

*Extract 5.5*

CM: Right, do you think that the skills or abilities that you could contribute to a job have changed over the years?

HF: I think they probably have. Em a few years ago I would have said no but I think there are, it just does- if only because I've noticed my own growing-up process em (.) in that I think I'm less brash and more mellow than I was. I find though that eh I don't find a substantive (.) difference in myself as I've grown older, I do think I think it's more my personal presentation has mellowed e::h (.) a little bit. I think I'm more careful and more caring (.) person but that id- I really do believe that eh I think you'd have to be a funny person if you didn't find that life experiences (.) didn't have that (.) em humbling effect on you if you like. But I'd say the difference is of degree not kind, than from the person I've always been. Em one thing that I would refute of what I have found is that eh curiously enough (.) em and I've surprised myself in this I've become and I've woken up much more to learning new techniques and new methods. I do get quite a kick and fulfilment em eh from learning new techniques. I mean I've nothing (.) there's nothing more that I enjoyed over the last five years (.) of em eh learning new software in bringing myself (.) made myself reasonably computer-literate. I mean I I brought myself up to date in terms of em computers in the workplace and computers in the office.

HF begins by offering a claim in terms which are very qualified, stating '*I think they probably have*'. She continues by implying that the changes which have occurred are ones which she has had to recognise through her own experience, in her statement that 'a few years ago I would have said no but I think there are, it just does- if only because I've noticed'. The effect of this is to suggest HF has had to accept the changes which have taken place. This functions to present the changes as being 'out there' and distanced to some extent from HF herself.

This claim is followed by descriptions of the changes which have occurred. Again, these are proposed in terms which are heavily qualified. HF states that '*I think I'm less brash and more mellow*' and '*my personal presentation has mellowed e::h a little bit. I think I'm more careful and caring*'. The skills referred to in all of these descriptions are interpersonal skills which might be relevant to employment.

In addition to the qualifications contained in the descriptions, the changes in skills are further downgraded. Firstly, HF emphasises the continuity between herself previously and herself now in stating that '*I don't find a substantive difference in myself*' and '*the difference is of degree not kind*'. Also, the explanation for the changes described is proposed as being an ordinary and natural process, namely '*my own growing-up process*'. Further HF argues that '*you'd have to be a funny person if you didn't find that life experiences (.) didn't have that (.) em humbling effect on you*', suggesting that the changes she has described are no more than those which would reasonably be expected for any individual. The effect of all of these descriptions is to downgrade the changes in abilities which are claimed. In so doing they also build up the credibility of HF's claim.

Such routine changes however are then contrasted with a more recent change. HF's statement that '*one thing I would refute of what I have found*' signals that what is to follow is different in nature and in tone from the changes described this far. Additionally, the difference between her earlier descriptions and that to come is marked by HF's statement that '*curiously enough (.) em and I've surprised myself in*

this'. Both the initiation of topic shift and the suggestion that the change about to be described is surprising, even to HF herself, imply that the next description will not be of a routine change such as those described earlier.

The description which follows this build up refers to a recent interest in 'learning new techniques and new methods'. HF claims that this change is both recent and important to her in stating that 'there's nothing more that I enjoyed over the last five years' and describes her interest in detail. Her change in skills, in '[bringing her] up to date in terms of em computers in the workplace and computers in the office', is moreover claimed to be directly relevant to employment.

Making such a claim for abilities raises two potential difficulties for HF. Firstly, there is the issue of her stake or interest. Here the ability is claimed directly for HF herself and not attributed to anyone else. Secondly, as noted in Chapter 4 (p. 125), previous studies have suggested that far from being interested in new technology older workers are often viewed as technophobic and unwilling to learn the necessary skills. To claim an increased interest in 'software' and 'computers' might therefore be treated with some scepticism. As a result, HF's claim for the change described might be open to undermining or at least challenge on either ground.

The claim here however is worked up as credible in two ways. Firstly, in describing her recent interest HF deploys the 'extreme case formulation' (Pomerantz, 1986) 'nothing more'. The effect of such a formulation, as noted previously, is to strengthen the persuasiveness of the claim and so to legitimate it. Credibility of the

claim is worked up however also in a second way: the contrast between the routine changes described earlier and this surprising later one.

The use of contrasts of the form ordinary X / extraordinary Y has been noted previously by other writers, such as Sacks (1984, 1992) and Wooffitt (1992). In examining the ways in which individuals produce accounts of paranormal experiences, Wooffitt (1992) argues that the X / Y format allows speakers to present themselves as rational rather than irrational witnesses. On such occasions an initial description of events as ordinary can produce an account which is likely to be heard by others as unexceptional. It thus presents the speaker as an ordinary and normal person and builds up his or her credibility as a witness to these and to other events. As a result, subsequent descriptions of events as extraordinary become more likely to be accepted as credible accounts in view of the previously established status of the speaker.

Here the use of the X / Y format lends weight to HF's claim to have developed an increased interest in learning new technology and its applications as she has got older. No basis other than the passing of time, suggested by the question, is offered by HF for the increased abilities which are claimed. Her earlier description of changes which are 'normal' and to be expected, together with the presentation of this change as surprising even to HF herself, builds up her credibility as a speaker in relation to this later claim for increased abilities.

What all of the responses considered in this section display is an orientation by the interviewees to the common association of age with a decline in employment-related abilities. The participants attend to this possibility in different ways. One way, when making claims for unchanged or increased skills or abilities, is to make no reference to age at all and to base the claim on other factors, such as skills not immediately related to employment or personal experience. A second way of dealing with negative inferences is to minimise any reduction in abilities without directly rejecting the inference of decline. Finally, where it is claimed that age has brought about an increase in skills or abilities, the credibility of the claim is worked up in various ways. Again, such a claim (Extract 5.5) displays a sensitivity to the association of age with negative rather than positive changes. None of the interviewees here claims unreservedly that age has brought him or her additional qualities for employment.

### ***Age and jobs***

In the responses above, all the interviewees when discussing employment-related skills and abilities, describe some change which has taken place over the years. Although the changes described may be positive or negative, none of those interviewed claims that their skills immediately related to employment have remained constant. In relation also to their personal experiences of changes over time, the participants were asked whether there had been any changes in the jobs for which they would apply. To this question, all interviewees responded by describing

jobs for which they would now not apply, either on grounds other than age or on the grounds that they anticipated age discrimination in relation to an application.

### *Not applying on grounds other than age*

The first form of response which was identified accounted for restrictions in job selection on grounds unrelated to age, for example:

#### *Extract 5.6*

CM: Are there any jobs that you yourself might have applied for before but you wouldn't go for now because you're older?

JB: Ah yes em (.) I think well I I briefly took a (.) an in- what was called an inform- information and resource management course eh Kingsley Lockhart (.) Thistle Street. It's a (.) web page design (.) em HTML and all the rest em (.) I thought well if I get some (.) insight into (.) the web the internet and eh how to actually design the pages that might stand me in good stead but I found out that it's really a young person's industry that now em. They speak in a language which eh I can't really understand (*laughs*) they use so much technical (.) eh jargon if that's the right word em that it it leaves me cold em. Having more or less been (.) eh a communicator through the written word (CM: mm hm) (.) I appreciate language and to see it (.) mangled like that is (.) is no I couldn't take it.

#### *Extract 5.7*

CM: Are there are any jobs that you might have applied for when you were younger but you wouldn't apply for now at your present age?

GRO: mm (.) yeah yeah yeah journalist. U:h I actually did work as a journalist for part-time for a period. U:h I got in right at the top in Time magazine and uh uh but I didn't understand journalistic politics so I didn't really last very long but I but uh I did very well at what I was doing and um (.) the the there are two reasons why I wouldn't apply for such a job if there first of all I wouldn't apply, I wouldn't apply for a job if you see in in that way because it's the kind of job that would have to come my way more I realise that there's only the kind that that I would get uh more through personal recommendation than something else and I don't happen to have that but uh uh looking in terms of wanting to go into the field and perhaps uh having the the the type of background and qualifications you'd expect for it now (.) u::m I uh I did I gave it a try and u::h as a matter of fact uh I di- I didn't mind then odd hours and I don't mind odd hours now but I wouldn't do it do uh do it (.) I wouldn't want to do things which were too fast for all of the time (CM: mm hm) and something like being a journalist for example would be would would be uh doings things in in the speed of journalism which is very fast at all of the time and I wouldn't want to do that.



JB and GRO above provide examples of jobs for which they would now not apply, that of 'web page design' for JB in Extract 5.6 and 'journalist' for GRO in Extract 5.7. Both interviewees claim to have the attributes required for the jobs which have been described. JB sets out his suitability for the work by referring to 'an information and resource management course' which he attended. GRO refers to his previous employment in the work described by stating 'I did actually work as a journalist for part-time for a period'. In addition, in saying 'I didn't mind then odd hours and I don't mind odd hours now' he claims that he continues to meet one requirement of such work. The descriptions of the jobs and the claims to have the attributes required for such work function in each case to deny that the current reasons for not applying for these jobs are related to the personal attributes of the interviewee.

Each interviewee provides two reasons for not currently seeking the work previously described. For each of them, the first reason offered lies in the work and how it relates to the interviewees themselves. JB in Extract 5.6 describes the work previously mentioned as 'really a young person's industry'. This description might apply either to those who work in the jobs or to the jobs themselves and the people for whom they are designed. In either case it implies that these jobs are suitable primarily for young people. The following statement that '(t)hey speak in a language which eh I can't really understand (*laughs*) they use so much technical (.) eh jargon if that's the right word em that it leaves me cold' sets out how the work relates to JB

himself in that it has a total lack of appeal for him. GRO in Extract 5.7 describes the job as 'the kind of job that would have to come my way' . . . more through personal recommendation than something else'. The effect of this is to claim that employment in the job described depends on factors other than personal application. GRO then states 'I don't happen to have that', claiming the work is currently unavailable to him. The first reason for not applying for such jobs then lies in the job itself and how it relates to the interviewee.

A second reason given by each of JB and GRO is that of personal choice. Each explicitly claims that he would not choose to work in the job described. In addition, an account is provided for making this choice. JB in Extract 5.6 accounts for his choice in terms of the factor of language referred to earlier, stating 'I appreciate language and to see it (.) mangled like that is (.) is no I couldn't take it'. Accordingly to GRO in Extract 5.7 the choice results from an aspect of the job other than that mentioned earlier, namely speed in that 'I wouldn't do it . . . I wouldn't want to do things which were too fast for all of the time'.

In each case, a restriction in choice of jobs is accounted for in terms of the work and how it relates to the interviewee and in terms of the interviewee's personal choice. By describing in this way the restriction on jobs for which they would apply, the interviewees account for changes in job selection in ways unrelated to their own abilities or to age.

## *Anticipating age discrimination*

In the second type of response identified, no reference is made to the appropriateness of the work nor to the choice of the interviewee. According to these participants it is age discrimination by employers which restricts their selection of jobs. For example:

### *Extract 5.8*

CM: Are there some jobs that you might have gone for before but you're not going for this time round?

JHA: Mm, receptionist and things like this and, gen- (.) where physical appearance is very important. Because I tend to feel that receptionist jobs are very much based on, e:h, e:h, youth and presentation, it's the forefront of, of the office and I think especially if you're a woman that's very important, they like young women. This is what I (.) this is the impression I get, you know.

### *Extract 5.9*

CM: Are there any jobs that you might have applied for before, but you now wouldn't go for being older?

JHE: In general, okay, well in the way of wouldn't employ me, for example, there's been some adverts in, now this is probably not called an advert but that's neither here nor there, the idea of this music business type thing that's opening up and they want people to get involved in that. I wouldn't apply for that because I would say that they wouldn't employ me. I wouldn't apply to work (.) in a travel agency firm, though that might be quite an interesting one because I presume that you would get some kind of discount there on your holidays, e:m (.) because I know they wouldn't employ you because it says so on the adverts, ha ha, you know (.) that you have to be young and this and that and whatever so, e:m, that I can't do. Bars, also I think would be very difficult, I don't have much experience working in a bar, and (.) I'm finding that they're tending to take, going by their adverts, younger and younger people as well, and I presume that they're meaning by younger somebody under thirty.

In the extracts above, age discrimination by employers provides the focus for the responses. Each interviewee describes various types of work for which she would not now apply. These comprise 'receptionist and things like this' in Extract 5.8 and

'music business', 'travel agency' and 'bars' in Extract 5.9. No claim is made here by either interviewee for her suitability for the jobs described. Instead each claims that such jobs are unavailable to her on the grounds of employers' practices. JHA in Extract 5.8 argues that, with regard to the jobs she describes, employers 'like young women' and that 'receptionist jobs are very much based on . . . youth and presentation'. Similarly, JHE in Extract 5.9 claims that 'I know they wouldn't employ you because it says so on the adverts . . . that you have to be young' and that 'I'm finding that they're tending to take, going by their adverts, younger and younger people as well'. In each case employers are claimed to have a preference for employing younger people in the jobs described previously. The effect in each extract is to account for changes in the job selection of the interviewee in terms of employers' recruitment practices, rather than in terms of any attributes or preferences of either JHA or JHE.

In both extracts the participants claim that their job choice is restricted by the use of age as a criterion of recruitment. Neither JHA nor JHE however provides any reason as to why employers might use age in this way. Nor is any further detail given as to the nature of age as a factor. Instead age again is treated as sufficient explanation in itself.

In response to this question none of the interviewees claims that the range of jobs available to him or her has increased over time, nor do they claim that any changes in job opportunities have resulted from changes in their skills or abilities. All participants instead describe jobs now unavailable to them, attributing the

restrictions on job selection to how they relate to the job and personal choice or to the use of age by employers in employing younger people.

### ***Age and looking for work***

A further question relating to the interviewees' own experiences of seeking work asked directly whether age had been a factor for them in looking for employment. From their responses to this question, two ways of accounting for individual experience were again identified. The first of these took the form of constructing age discrimination as an account for unemployment. A second way of accounting for unemployment avoiding any reference to age discrimination at all.

### ***Constructing age discrimination***

The place of age as a factor in not finding work is evident in the following extracts:

#### *Extract 5.10*

CM: Have you found age to be a factor in looking for employment?

JN: I think it must be because I'm someone who all my life has never stayed very long anywhere, I've probably stayed two and a half years in two or three jobs in my life (.) and I've spent a lot of time in London working as a (.) temp (CM: mm hm) mainly within the newspaper industry but not only. And when I first came up here ten years ago I (.) study and I used to do temporary work in summer and I could pick up work like that (*snaps fingers*) I could pick up a newspaper, I could just walk in to an agency or as I did (.) I rang up Edinburgh University after a while and sort of would always get (.) And then maybe about five years ago it began to get difficult (.) both in London and here (.) and there was no other reason I could find because I could (.) I'd always learnt particular skills as I'd moved in offices, you know I'd sort of kept up to date I started out with a little typewriter and worked my way through (.) you know. (CM: mm hm) So there was nothing (.) in me that I could see you know was inadequate to (.) sort of (.) and I could only think it had to be age.

Extract 5.11

CM: Have you found age to be a factor in the time you've been looking for employment?

JHE: Well, I think it is. The difficulty to me with this question is how do I prove it. (CM: mm hm) Eh, I can't say I've ever been to an interview (.) or (.) eh (.) something like that where somebody's actually said 'nah forget it, I'm not going to employ you because of your age' (.) so it's very difficult to prove. (CM: mm hm) E:m (.) the only way that I can (.) say that I think this is, is the case is, if I think about it when I graduated from the (.) diploma in librarianship, which would be back in 1993, e:m, and then applied for (.) I did librarianship (.) I had worked as a librarian years before but (.) I also did (.) that because it's a practical course (.) rather than theoretical, so I particularly did it to get employment, after having been in, em, full-time education for (.) ah, eight years, something like that, you know (.) whatever, I mean the first, you know, no can't be that long, e:m, first degree anyway, it's the Highers beforehand and so on, so the idea was that I start to make money after being on a grant, e:h (.) this kind of thing. E:m, what I found from that was that, was that I wasn't getting anywhere afterwards in the way of getting a job.

Extract 5.12

CM: Has age been a factor for you in looking for employment?

GRO: I think age is the major consideration yes. There there are things related to age which u::h (.) I feel this is sort of commonplace (.) I haven't made very many job applications (.) I have targeted them though and uh and uh when they you know they've come back with absolutely no response whatsoever u::h I can understand why a lot of them have not been successful but the last one I cannot understand and uh I know u::h I know from people inside the joint which was The Scottish Office that uh there was there were a lot of applications for this particular thing but um um uh I'm very well qualified for that that, I could show it, but there was a test involved as well and uh not even not even a cheep not even not even a return letter.

Extract 5.13

CM: Do you think age has been a factor in your efforts to find a job?

JB: I feel sure it must be a (.) a factor, yes. Em as I say I've tried to (.) take all the advice I've been given by jobcentres, jobclubs in how to present (.) your applications in the initial stages, I think I've followed all their advice (.) so I should be getting some results from especially from that number of applications but as I say only one interview has resulted em (.) as soon as I perhaps I've been phrasing it wrong in my covering letter as a mature honours graduate (.) the word mature obviously sets off alarm bells (*laughs*) once they once they read it perhaps they don't read any further. I don't put my age on the (.) cv which another point that I've (.) followed (CM: right) Em I don't see why (.) I should but obviously they can guess from the educational (.) section that (.) having been away from school for so long and (.) I must be of a certain age anyway. So they can work that one out. (.) But it's hard not to (.) it's hard to construct a cv without giving the game away (*both laugh*) about your age. Em (.) so (.) I it comes back again to what I was saying about legislation I mean if it's (.) if it is illegal to discriminate on various (.) grounds as it is now, why not age? Em you could say 'oh it might be difficult to prove' but there again so are some of the other (.) eh reasons for discrimination, sometimes they're difficult to prove as well but (.) it hasn't stopped them being (.) outlawed.

In Extracts 5.10 to 5.13 above, when asked whether age has been a factor in looking for employment, each of the interviewees immediately claims that it has been a factor for him or her. It soon becomes evident moreover that age has not been just any factor, rather it is proposed as one which has prevented the interviewee from obtaining the employment which he or she seeks. According to GRO in Extract 5.12, 'age is the major consideration'.

In support of their claims, each of the interviewees in Extracts 5.10 to 5.13 sets out the line of reasoning which leads him or her to propose age as a factor. In this reasoning two features are apparent in the accounts. Of these, the first is a suitability for employment, and the second is a lack of current success in finding work.

Suitability for employment in the above extracts is claimed in several ways. One way is to describe previous success in obtaining the sort of employment which is being sought now. JN in Extract 5.10 argues that 'I could pick up work like that . . . I could pick up a newspaper, I could just walk in to an agency or as I did (.) I rang up Edinburgh University after a while and sort of would always get'. Here, the ease with which she could obtain jobs in the past is emphasised in three ways. Firstly, the use of a three-part list (Jefferson, 1991) suggests that JN could find work not only from these sources but from an extremely wide range of sources related to employment. Secondly, any difficulty in finding employment is minimised by the use of the 'depreciatory' 'just' (Lee, 1987). 'Just' downgrades the action necessary

to obtain work through an agency and suggests that JN could obtain employment in that way with minimal effort. Thirdly, her success in obtaining employment is further built up by the use of the extreme case formulation 'always'. These three features, taken together, all emphasise JN's previous success in finding work whenever necessary and without difficulty from a range of possible sources.

Another means of displaying suitability for work refers to the skills required and the applicability of these skills to employment. In Extract 5.10 JN states that she had 'always learnt particular skills as I'd moved in offices, you know I'd sort of kept up to date'. The reference to 'offices' implies that the skills are those appropriate to such work. JHE in Extract 5.11 describes how she 'graduated from the diploma in librarianship . . . I also did (.) that because it's a practical course (.) rather than theoretical, so I particularly did it to get employment'. In doing so, she makes an explicit claim both for the skills and for their immediate relevance to the work that she seeks. GRO in Extract 5.12 similarly makes an explicit claim for his skills in relation to one particular job, stating that 'I'm very well qualified for that that, I could show it'. In each case, a description of skills and their relevance displays the suitability of the interviewee for employment.

Suitability in Extract 5.13 is implicit rather than explicit. In describing his process of jobsearch JB states that 'I've tried to (.) take all the advice I've been given by jobcentres, jobclubs in how to present (.) your application in the initial stages, I think I've followed all their advice'. The third parties described here, 'jobcentres, jobclubs', are heard not as just as sources of external advice but in addition as



bodies who could reasonably be expected to have some detailed knowledge of the current employment situation and the skills required for particular jobs. In invoking the approval of such bodies for the job applications which he has submitted, JB implicitly claims that they accept his skills as being appropriate to the jobs for which he applies.

Previous success in obtaining similar employment and an explicit or implicit claim to have the appropriate skills can thus each be used to demonstrate the suitability of the interviewee for the jobs for which he or she applies. In the reasoning displayed, this claimed suitability is in each case followed by a second element, a lack of current success in finding work. In Extract 5.10, JN contrasts the ease with which she could find jobs previously with her recent experience of looking work, stating that 'maybe about five years ago it began to get difficult'. JHE in Extract 5.11 claims that her difficulty became apparent immediately after she obtained her qualification, stating that 'I wasn't getting anywhere afterwards in the way of getting a job'. Both GRO and JB emphasise the current lack of response to job applications that they make. GRO in Extract 5.12 emphasises the lack of response by use of the extreme case formulation 'not even a cheep not even a return letter'. JB in Extract 5.13 refers to the minimal response that 'only one interview has resulted'.

After describing the line of reasoning in support of the initial claim, each interviewee then offers an upshot of the preceding argument. Upshots and summaries in interactions allow speakers to re-present aspects of a prior account and so to provide a conclusion (Heritage and Watson, 1979). In the present Extracts, the

upshots provided by the speakers take two different forms. One form of conclusion is that the reasoning set out supports the initial claim. JHE in Extract 5.11 begins her response with the statement '(t)he difficulty to me with this question is how do I prove it'. Her final upshot is 'I wasn't getting anywhere afterwards in the way of getting a job'. Similarly, GRO in Extract 5.12 offers the initial claim that 'age is the major consideration' and the upshot 'not even a cheep not even a return letter'. A second form of conclusion is that the reasoning supports a final claim. JN in 5.10 begins with the qualified statement 'I think it must be' and concludes with 'I could only think it had to be age 'cause I couldn't fit in anything else you know'. In Extract 5.13 JB starts with the claim 'I feel sure it must be a (.) a factor' and ends with an extended upshot suggesting that age discrimination should be 'outlawed'.

Both forms of conclusion however have the same effect. The upshot of each response is that the reasoning displayed by the speaker provides sufficient evidence to support either the initial or the final claim. In this way the credibility of the claim is treated as established. For each interviewee, the response constitutes a claim that age is the factor which operates against him or her in looking for employment. The interviewees in Extracts 5.10 to 5.13 construct themselves as victims of age discrimination. At the same time, such discrimination accounts for their unemployment in terms unrelated to the interviewees or to their suitability or efforts in looking for work.

## *Avoiding reference to age discrimination*

While the interviewees above claim that age prevents them from obtaining employment, other interviewees make no reference to age at all in looking for work.

For example:

### *Extract 5.14*

CM: Have you found age to be a factor in looking for employment?

FV: I think it really depends what uh what kind of brain you've got (.) (CM: mm hm) There are two kin- kinds of brains, there there are the (.) eh work is separated from life (.) and you've already found out life is separated from work and there's the attitude that the damn thing is the bit that you fill in from being born to die (.) E::h personally I can split the two, (.) I know what I like I know what I don't like, if I find I don't like something in work (.) I create a situation where I'm out of it (.) If I find there's something I like in work I create a situation where I'm even further into it.

### *Extract 5.15*

CM: Has age been a factor for you?

PO: I think (.) well (.) I haven't had that many interviews . . . but (.) I keep trying. Not so hard as I used to actually (.) (*laughing*) I've been kept very busy lately (.) e:m that's another thing, better not say too much on the tape (*laughing*) No, it's just that e:m (.) my sons (.) e:m have all got houses, they've just bought new houses or changed houses and such like and (.) there's such a lot to do when you do move from house to house (.) One of them's a complete rewire and (.) knocking down walls, building up walls and such like and what have you. Lucky enough, I did that as well in my life (.) e:m having had many different houses myself. I always bought old ones, did them up (.) sold them then and carried on and such like.

### *Extract 5.16*

CM: Have you found age to be a factor in looking for jobs?

JHA: I mean, I feel, for myself, at my age (.) e::m, I suppose it's a bit difficult for me to explain but I don't look upon myself as being unemployed. (.) I was a full-time house-wife and a mother of five children, (CM: right) but happened to have gone through a divorce, so to say that I'm unemployed, I'm only unemployed from my family, if you know what I'm saying, more than anything else . . . I mean I was joined in a business with my ex-husband, (CM: mm right) OK, so I was doing the passive side of the business if you like (.) and our breakdown as a marriage has turned out that he's got everything and I've got nothing. So to me this is not just a matter of employment, it's a lifestyle I'm looking for now, you know, who the hell am I? (.) What am I going to do with the rest of my life?

The speakers in Extracts 5.14 to 5.16 do not respond directly to the question asked, that is whether age had been a factor for them. None of these interviewees makes any reference to age throughout the extract. Instead each speaker claims to be a somewhat different type of person or have an identity which results in a particular orientation towards employment.

FV in Extract 5.14 claims that 'it really depends what uh kind of brain you've got' going on to distinguish between two different kinds of brain. He describes the work orientation of each kind. One kind of brain he describes as 'there are the (.) eh work is separated from life', implying that for such people employment is not a major aspect of their lives. The second kind of brain is described as 'the damn thing is the bit that you fill in from being born to die'. This description suggests that in these cases work does form the major part of the person's life.

Having offered this distinction, FV describes his own attitude as 'I can split the two', claiming that he falls into the first category of his two-fold distinction. He then sets out his own orientation to work in stating 'I know what I like I know what I don't like' and in the final part of the extract describes the consequences of his type of attitude for employment. FV does not state that he is currently out of work as a result of this orientation to it, although the extract is heard in this way. The implication is that it is his attitude towards work, and not age discrimination by employers, which leads to him being unemployed at this time.

In Extract 5.15, PO states 'I haven't had that many interviews . . . but I keep trying. Not so hard as I used to actually'. This makes explicit a claim that he is currently less than fully committed to looking for work. He follows this claim with an account for his present orientation towards jobseeking. 'I've been kept very busy lately' provides an account which implies that his reduced efforts in seeking work result from lack of time. This account however is treated by PO himself as requiring further work, as he states 'better not say too much on the tape'. Subsequently he offers a further account for being 'kept very busy', by referring at length to his sons' houses and stating that 'there's such a lot to do when you do move from house to house'. This is followed by a description of his own past experience of such matters when PO states that 'I did that as well in my life'.

One point to note here is that at no stage does PO claim that he has carried out any of the work on his sons' houses which he has described as necessary. The implication however of the description is that it is this work which has kept PO 'very busy'. He thus provides an account for being unemployed without reference to age or age discrimination.

JHA in Extract 5.16 also accounts for unemployment with no reference in age in her response. She accomplishes this through three features of her response. Firstly, JHA claims that 'I suppose it's a bit difficult for me to explain but I don't look upon myself as being unemployed'. Such a claim however might be very difficult to support as JHA acknowledges in her lead up to it.

Secondly, in support of the claim she provides a detailed account in terms of her family circumstances. Within this, she describes her previous status in relation to employment as 'a full-time house-wife and a mother of five children'. Her change from this status is explained by her having 'gone through a divorce'. Following this description of change, she re-phrases the initial claim in stating 'I'm only unemployed from my family, if you know what I mean'. The family circumstances and consequences of the 'breakdown as a marriage' are then described further to account for her present status and claim.

Finally JHA provides an upshot (Heritage and Watson, 1979) of her earlier argument. Here she states '(s)o to me this is not just a matter of employment, it's a lifestyle I'm looking for now, you know, who the hell am I? (.) What am I going to do with the rest of my life?'. The upshot consequently is JHA is currently engaged in a search for her very identity and that employment in comparison is not important to her. She treats her initial claim as being now part of a wider context and supported by the detailed account which she has provided of family background. By reducing the importance of employment in this way, she is able to account for being unemployed while not making age relevant in her response.

In the extracts considered in this section, the participants provide two very different forms of response. The first form of response emphasises the role of age in looking for work: its importance as a factor is built up over the course of the response. After displaying their suitability for employment and their lack of success in obtaining work, age for these interviewees is left as the only or the obvious explanation for

their lack of work. Age discrimination by employers consequently is constructed as an account for unemployment.

In contrast, in the second form of response interviewees make no reference to age whatsoever. Their lack of work is accounted for by reference to personal identities and their consequent orientation to employment. In these extracts the absence of age is marked. By providing the responses identified here, the participants are able to avoid any mention of age notwithstanding that it is specifically put them in the question.

## ***Discussion***

I have in this chapter examined the interviewees' responses to questions on three aspects of their personal experiences of being out of work. These related to changes over time in their own skills and abilities relevant to employment, changes in the jobs for which they would apply and whether age had been a factor in looking for work.

From all of the responses considered in this chapter, there can be identified two broad ways in which discursive resources are deployed, or discursive strategies. These can usefully be termed the age discrimination strategy and the age avoidance strategy.

Within the age discrimination strategy, age provides a negative orientation for the participants. Age is proposed to be the basis of the actions of others, particularly employers, towards older workers, or it provides the basis of negative inferences. It provides the focus for responses which minimise reductions in skills or abilities, descriptions of restrictions on job selection which are imposed on the interviewee and age discrimination offers one way of accounting for unemployment. In each case the orientation of the speaker is to age as a negative presence in looking for work. No explanation is made explicit of why employers should use age in these ways. Accordingly, while speakers build up at length and legitimate their claims that age is being used against them, they do not specify what is contained within age in such uses. Although the use has to be established, the inferences of age are assumed to be shared knowledge (see Edwards, 1997) and simply taken for granted. In short, these responses construct and orient to age discrimination in employment. The interviewees within the responses take up the positions of being victims of discriminatory practices.

The age avoidance strategy avoids any mention of age, even where the interviewee is asked specifically about its role as a factor. Instead, the interviewees refer to other factors such as experience, personal choice or family circumstances. This strategy can be seen in responses which claim unchanged or increased skills and in claims that restrictions on job selection are chosen by the individual participant. It provides also a way of accounting for the unemployment of the interviewee without reference to age. In these responses the interviewees do not deny that age has been a factor in looking for work, they simply omit it altogether from the account offered. Rather



than simply providing an orientation however, the personal factors deployed are described usually in detail, made relevant by the interviewee to employment and their roles as explanations are made explicit. In contrast to deployments of age, the explanatory effect of such descriptions is not assumed. Within these responses, the interviewees construct identities unrelated to age or to the possibility of being a victim of discrimination.

One interpretation of uses of the age avoidance strategy might be that, in these instances, age just has little relevance to the participants. In constructing aspects of their experiences in other ways and by describing other factors, age possibly might be viewed as something which has little impact on them and on their efforts to find work. This however would leave unexplained the finding that the interviewees avoid age in response to specific questions rather than deny that it has any importance.

In addition, research into other identities suggests that silence on an issue cannot be taken to mean that it is unimportant to individuals. Allen (1994), in a study of identities in Northern Ireland, found that few of her participants would define themselves in terms of religious identity. The absence of religion in the construction of identity, according to Allen, did not mean that it was irrelevant to the individuals concerned but rather suggested that it was of extreme importance. To define themselves in religious terms would have carried high personal and social costs for the participants, costs which could be avoided by remaining silent on the issue. In the present study therefore, age avoidance might be regarded as a strategy by which interviewees are able to avoid the costs of negotiating age in other ways.

The two strategies identified here appear to be rather different from those found in other research into discrimination. In a study of employed minority ethnic women, Ross (2000) asked her participants about their experiences of racial discrimination in employment. She found that commonly her interviewees would explicitly deny or trivialise any personal experiences of discrimination. The women she interviewed did not deny that discrimination occurred; instead they would refer to the experience of others of discriminatory practice and downgrade the importance of any personal experiences which might be viewed as discriminatory. Ross argues that the use of these strategies functioned in two ways for her participants. Firstly, it allowed them to acknowledge the existence of discrimination on the grounds of race within society. Secondly, by trivialising their own experiences of discrimination, the women she interviewed could avoid being seen as 'social dopes'. By accounting for own experiences in other ways, such as re-characterising the experiences, the interviewees did not appear as powerless within society. They could thus avoid being viewed as passive victims of inequitable practice.

It is interesting to note that the strategies used by the participants in the present study differ to such an extent from those identified by Ross (2000) in her study. Instead of avoiding appearing as victims of discrimination, some of the present interviewees construct such identities. Similarly, other interviewees in this study avoid any mention of discrimination: they do not deny nor trivialise it. One explanation for these differences might lie in the contexts of the two studies: Ross (2000) interviewed women who were in employment whereas here I have

interviewed those who are out of work. For the present interviewees, strategies of denying or trivialising discrimination arguable would be of little effect. They would be left to account for their lack of employment in other ways. Both strategies which are identified here have the effect of providing an account for being unemployed.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the present discussion of discrimination and discursive strategies. Firstly, being out of work is an accountable matter. While Ross (2000) observes that not facing discrimination is accountable, it would appear in the present study that being unemployed is if anything more accountable. Secondly, both sets of findings emphasise the importance of understanding discrimination and the identities of those affected within the everyday contexts relevant to them. The discourse of participants should be viewed as action in the immediate context and examined for the identities which are made relevant not by the analyst but by the participants themselves.

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## Chapter six

### Jobseekers and age discrimination

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#### *Introduction*

I have looked, in the last two Chapters, at the identities which jobseekers construct for older workers in general and at how they make sense of their experiences of looking for work. From the responses considered in the last chapter, I identified two discursive strategies used by the participants. The first of these was an age discrimination strategy. Within this strategy, age provided a negative orientation for changes in skills and abilities and age discrimination was used to account for restrictions in job selection and a lack of employment. The second strategy identified was an age avoidance strategy, in which interviewees avoided making any mention of age even where it was specifically included in the question put to them. Changes in skills, restrictions on job choice and lack of employment were instead described and accounted for in terms of factors personal to the interviewee. Where this second strategy was used, age was markedly absent.

In order to examine more fully the strategies which interviewees use in relation to discrimination I will in this chapter consider their responses to questions on other aspects of employment practices. Two sets of extracts come from responses to questions which related directly to age discrimination. The first of these asked whether there were any circumstances in which age discrimination might be justified, and the secondly asked directly if the interviewee thought that employers discriminate against older workers. Where speakers claimed in response to this question that employers do discriminate against older workers, they were asked also about possible reasons for such discrimination.

The first set of responses to be examined in this chapter though came in response to a question about the suitability of jobs for workers of different ages in general. I considered in the last chapter the participants' responses to a similar question of whether there had been changes over time in the jobs for which they would apply. To that question, the interviewees responded by describing restrictions in the jobs available to them. As will be seen below, interviewees respond differently when they are asked whether they thought any jobs might be more suitable for younger workers than older workers or more suitable for older workers rather than younger workers.

## ***Age and suitability for jobs***

Two forms of response to the question of the suitability of jobs for workers of different ages were identified. Interviewees responded either by claiming that jobs are more suitable for older workers or by minimising the advantages of younger workers.

### *Claiming that jobs are more suitable for older workers*

In some responses the participants claim directly that there are jobs more suitable for older workers, for instance:

#### *Extract 6.1*

- CM: Are there any jobs which would be more suitable for younger people than older people or vice versa, do you think?
- JN: To the degree that any job (.) might require some people with (.) more experience in their work um (.) only so like a (.) particularly someone like a nurse or a doctor who's been in their job for twenty years (.) they'll know a lot more than (.) someone who's just (.) finished their training.

#### *Extract 6.2*

- CM: Do you think there are any jobs that are more suitable for younger people than older people, or vice versa?
- AR: Eh, must be, I suppose the B&Q use older people as a good example of using their knowledge (.) an older person who might have been a tradesman, or not even a tradesman, has done do-it-yourself and shopped in B&Q all their life (.) are going to be more knowledgeable of (.) the uses of all the pieces of equipment, the different woods that are there etc. (.) A younger person who's been clubbing out at eighteen is not, and they're there at eighteen (.) they aren't going to know.

The responses above begin with an immediate qualification of what is to follow, namely '(t)o the degree that' in Extract 6.1 and '(e)h, must be, I suppose' in Extract 6.2. These suggest that what follows in each case is the measured and considered response of the speaker. Each interviewee then provides a description of employment and of the people appropriate for such employment. JN in Extract 6.1 offers a description in general terms which encompasses both the work and the people required for the work, stating 'any job might require some people with (.) more experience'. In Extract 6.2 AR's statement that 'B & Q use older people as a good example of using their knowledge', for which 'older people' will be 'more knowledgeable' similarly provides a description of the work and of the people appropriate for such work.

Each response continues with a contrast between older workers and younger workers in how they relate to the work described. JN in Extract 6.1 provides a more specific example of the work she previously described, referring to 'someone like a nurse or a doctor'. In relation to this example, a person who has 'been in the job for twenty years' and is implicitly older is claimed to be more appropriate than 'someone who's just (.) finished their training' and who is implicitly younger. In Extract 6.2 AR similarly claims that older workers are more appropriate for the work described, providing a contrast between 'an older person who might have been a tradesman' and '(a) younger person who's been clubbing out at eighteen'. Age thus is made explicit in the description.

Each speaker provides an explicit basis for the claim. In Extract 6.1 JN refers firstly to knowledge, in claiming that 'they'll know a lot more'. A second basis is then provided in the form of experience. She claims that from experience people will have learned 'how to manage it better, how to manage the time better, how (.) how to get things done'. AR in Extract 6.2 argues that '[older people] are going to be more knowledgeable of(.) the uses of all the pieces of equipment, the different woods that are there etc.'. The three-part list provided in each case builds up the status of the experience and the knowledge described and gives rhetorical force to the argument. In each extract, the use of such a list adds weight to the credibility of the claim that the jobs described are more suitable for older than for younger workers.

In Extracts 6.1 and 6.2 the suitability of older workers for particular jobs is claimed explicitly in the course of the responses. Relative suitability of older workers for particular jobs can be claimed also by describing work for which younger workers are less suitable, as in the following extracts:

*Extract 6.3*

CM: Do you think there are any jobs generally that are more suitable for younger people than older people or vice versa?

IC: I've seen (.) to my mind very young people being u:m (.) in positions of high responsibility (.) A twenty a twenty-four year old in charge of an office worries me. They might be an excellent travel agent or (.) or whatever u:m but to find them in charge of an office does worry me (.) simply because (.) u:m we come back to the good old word experience.

*Extract 6.4*

CM: Are there any jobs do you think that are more suitable for younger people than older people or vice versa?



JBR: I think perhaps for (.) jobs involving (.) heavy responsibility (.) policy-making eh (.) civil service, government eh et cetera. I think the higher up you get (.) well I wouldn't like to put a twenty-five year old say in charge of a ministry or in charge of a local government department even em. I think eh it takes an older head in that case eh (.) to to to make the real judgements that have to be done.

IC and JBR above provide general descriptions of types of work and of the requirements for such employment. IC in Extract 6.3 refers to 'positions of high responsibility' and being 'in charge of an office', while JBR in Extract 6.4 cites 'jobs involving (.) heavy responsibility (.) policy-making' and being 'in charge of a ministry or in charge of a local government department'. The emphasis placed on 'responsibility' in each case suggests that work described is demanding and will require someone of more than average capability to perform it.

These descriptions are followed in each extract by a contrast. IC in Extract 6.3, in stating that 'a twenty-four year old in charge of an office worries me' provides an evaluation of younger people in the employment described. This is contrasted with an evaluation of younger people in other employment in that '(t)hey might be an excellent travel agent or (.) or whatever'. JBR in Extract 6.4, on the other hand, argues that 'I wouldn't like to put a twenty-five year old say in charge . . . it takes an older head in that case eh (.) to to make the real judgements that have to be done'. The contrast offered in this case is between younger and older workers in relation to the work which he has described previously.

In Extract 6.3 IC concludes by stating 'because (.) u:m we come back to the good old word experience'. In doing so, she makes explicit the basis of her earlier claim.

The basis of the claim in Extract 6.4 is not explicit. JBR refers to 'an older head' but does not make relevant any particular aspect of this description. Accordingly it is left unspecified whether the claim is based on any age-related inference or upon age itself.

In each of Extracts 6.3 and 6.4 the description of work and the subsequent contrast which is provided function as a claim that younger workers are less suitable than older workers for employment in relation to the work which is described. Along with the responses in Extracts 6.1 and 6.2, these construct older workers as more suitable for the jobs described than are younger workers.

### *Minimising the jobs suitable for younger workers*

Rather than claiming that jobs are more suitable for older workers, other interviewees minimise the advantages of younger workers in relation to jobs. For example:

#### *Extract 6.5*

CM: Are there any jobs do you think that are more suitable for younger workers than older people or vice versa?

JG: I definitely say that in the case of manual work the young people may be more suited, more suitable because they're certainly more fitter. I can't see and, e::h, a lot of other areas of work, in particular office work where a younger person is necessarily better than an older person, I can't see that.

#### *Extract 6.6*

CM: Okay, do you think there are any jobs that are more suitable for younger workers than for older people or vice versa?

HF: Not particularly, no. Em I'm sure if I thought hard em (.) you know lighthouse keeper, there's none of them now are there em. I'm sure you there will be (.) if I thought long and hard about it but I think in terms of the mainstream em ninety per cent of eh the work I really don't think there's anything em eh. I don't see that eh (.) I mean heck even talking about take something very obvious in terms of the youth market or youth industry like a record shop a Virgin record shop or something like that I still think there's a place for someone older in there if only to serve the mums and dads that are going in there for presents.

Above, JG and HF both allow that there may be jobs more suitable for younger workers. JG in Extract 6.5 provides the specific example of one type of work, namely 'manual work'. HF in Extract 6.6 rejects her initial suggestion of 'lighthouse keeper' on the grounds that 'there's none of them now are there'. Following this, HF states that 'I'm sure you there will be (.) if I thought long and hard about it'. In saying this, she allows that there may be jobs more suitable for younger workers. The rejection of her initial suggestion along with the displayed consideration of the question both function however to indicate the difficulty of thinking of any such jobs.

Any advantage conferred on younger workers by these initial suggestions is then limited. JG in Extract 6.5 contrasts the work described with 'a lot of other areas of work'. Similarly in Extract 6.6 HF states that 'in terms of the mainstream em ninety per cent of eh the work I really don't think there's anything'. The effect of these formulations is to present the earlier instances as exceptions to the general rule. Billig (1987) notes that the processes of particularisation and generalisation are complementary forms of argument. By the particularisation of specific examples and different treatment of these examples, speakers emphasise the applicability of the

general rule to the majority of cases. The descriptions here of possible exceptions where younger people might have an advantage accordingly strengthens rhetorically each speaker's claim that younger workers have no advantage in relation to the majority of work. Each speaker accordingly claims that most jobs are not more suitable for younger than for older workers.

To reinforce further the general case, each speaker provides an example of work which would not be an exception. JG in Extract 6.5 argues that 'in particular office work where a younger person is necessarily better than an older person, I can't see that' explicit ruling out one example. In Extract 6.6 HF provides the example of 'something very obvious in terms of the youth market or youth industry like a record shop a Virgin record shop or something like that'. The repeated references to 'youth' and the deployment of the three-part list both work up the rhetorical force of this example as a case to which the general rule should apply. In dismissing the possible exceptions which they suggest, both JG and HF reinforce their earlier claims.

### ***Re-characterising age discrimination***

In the last section some interviewees claimed that there were jobs more suitable for older workers than for younger workers while others minimised the jobs more suitable for younger workers. Following these responses, the participants were asked whether there were any situations in which age discrimination might be justified. The direction of any discrimination was left unspecified: no suggestion was made in

the question as to whether discrimination should favour or operate against the older worker. A possible form of response therefore might be that older workers should be favoured in relation to the jobs for which they had been claimed to be more suitable. None of the participants respond in these terms. Instead, they describe work in which age might justifiably be used against older workers. Such uses of age however are not categorised as discrimination. Consider the following extracts:

*Extract 6.7*

CM: Do you think there are any situations where discrimination on grounds of age might be justified?

JB: Uh well (.) if there are important (.) physical (.) uh requirements involved in the job like surgery perhaps em (.) operating on someone. If the (.) surgeon is perhaps of a certain age (.) maybe em physically they they're not quite as (.) deft if that's the word as as a younger person but (.) Perhaps also (.) driving, using machinery, vehicles em (.) Again the physical side might (.) or probably only in extreme age though rather (.) Even fifties and sixties there's no problem I would imagine but say seventies and eighties it might begin (.) physically to have an effect (CM: mm hm) em. Obviously airline pilots, stress comes into it (.) regular medical checks eh are necessary em, (.) high-risk work em, physically demanding work eh but not I would say intellectually demanding work em.

*Extract 6.8*

CM: Yeah, are there any situations do you think, where age discrimination might be justified?

JHE: Mm (.) ha ha, that's an interesting one there (.) eh (.) it might be justified (.) Well, I wouldn't like to, I'm not being facetious but I wouldn't like to see myself, say like coming up seventy or whatever, working in a driving job, I think that would be a bit silly, again like physical type stuff and you realise the (.) but then again, that's not to say that everybody does, but I personally, you know (.) if I was in a situation where, a safety type thing, e:m, to do with age, in a physical thing, then, I would hope I would say now, let's, let's be serious here, there's no point dragging along an ambulance in this kind of stuff, people, that kind of thing (.) E:m, I would, if you (.) you know, kind of spread the idea across the board, I would agree with, e:m (.) I can't offhand think of anything else to be honest.

*Extract 6.9*

CM: I mean, are there any situations do you think where age discrimination might be justified?

JG: Yes, yes, so let's see, if the work you do requires a high standard of health, like e::h, you know, good eyesight, you now, good hearing, there has to be discrimination that it is likely that once you get to a certain age your eyesight won't be quite as

good, or let's say your hearing and e::h, I could understand in particular jobs where, you know, things of that nature, health, has to be, e::h, a very strong factor in getting employment and e::h, I could see that being justified then, and e::h, that is not really, an employer in that case is not really, I don't think discriminating against age, it just so happens that in older age your health can deteriorate in certain ways. And I think that could be justified, it's not, nothing personal, (.) and age may be a factor but it's nothing personal, but I think that if employers have discriminated by age alone and nothing else, it is like a personal matter, I think that's important that you could be getting held back from employment for a personal reason, that is not healthy at all, (.) and as I said in some jobs there is a high standard of health maybe required for, for certain reasons and that, that can be justified.

On the question of whether age discrimination might be justified in any situations, two points are clearly apparent from the responses in Extracts 6.7 to 6.9. Firstly, each of the speakers suggests that ageing may be associated with a negative characteristic, in each case a decline in physical capabilities. JB in Extract 6.7 suggests that '(i)f the (.) surgeon is perhaps of a certain age (.)maybe em physically they they're not quite as (.) deft . . . as a younger person'. JHE in Extract 6.8 also suggests a decline in physical abilities with age in stating 'if I was in a situation where, a safety type thing, e:m to do with age, in a physical thing'. Similarly in Extract 6.9 JG argues that 'it is likely that once you get to a certain age your eyesight won't be as good, or let's say your hearing'. In each extract the speaker orients to the negative possibility of decline.

Secondly, each interviewee suggests that the loss of physical ability described would be a relevant consideration for certain types of employment. In Extract 6.7, JB offers two specific examples of such work, namely 'in the job like surgery perhaps em (.) operating on someone' and '(o)bviously airline pilots'. He also provides the more general example '(p)erhaps also (.) driving, using machinery, vehicles em (.) Again

the physical side might (.) or probably only in extreme age though'. JB further argues that physical considerations are relevant to 'high-risk work em, physically demanding work eh but not I would say intellectually demanding work'. By implication, physical abilities should not be taken into consideration in relation to the second type of work. JHE in Extract 6.8 refers to 'working in a driving job, I think that would be a bit silly, again like physical type stuff'. She emphasises the difficulty of finding any further relevant examples in stating that 'I can't offhand think of anything else to be honest'. This suggests that there are no relevant circumstances beyond those she has previously described. In Extract 6.9 JG refers similarly to 'particular jobs where, you know, things of that nature, health, has to be, e::h a very strong factor in getting employment'. What is evident in all of these examples is the narrow description provided of the work which might be relevant. The examples given of particular jobs are highly specific, such as 'surgeon' and 'airline pilot' (Extract 6.7). Descriptors used in the more general examples, such as 'extreme age' (Extract 6.7), 'physical type stuff' (Extract 6.8) and 'very strong factor' (Extract 6.9) also limit the range of work described to particular circumstances. The effect of both the specific and the general examples is to restrict the relevance of any loss of physical ability to a very limited range of work.

The effect of the interviewees' suggestions of physical decline and descriptions of situations of relevance is to redefine the nature of the use of age in these circumstances. All interviewees indicate that the consideration of physical abilities would be relevant and indeed justified, albeit in very restricted instances. Neither JB in Extract 6.7 nor JHE in Extract 6.8 makes direct reference to age discrimination,

notwithstanding that it was specifically included in the question. In their responses though, the emphasis on particular abilities implicitly suggests that these are distinguished from age itself. The consideration of such factors therefore comes to be viewed as distinguishable from age discrimination. This orientation is made explicit in Extract 6.9. JG refers to the consideration by employer of physical capabilities in stating that ‘an employer in that case is not really, I don’t think discriminating against age’. Whereas selection on the basis of physical capabilities is argued to be ‘nothing personal’, discrimination based solely on age would be ‘a personal matter’ and ‘not healthy at all’. Thus, according to JG, the use of age as a criterion of employment would not be acceptable but consideration of physical abilities ‘can be justified’ in the situations described.

The distinction in each case, implicit in Extracts 6.7 and 6.8 and explicit in Extract 6.9, acts to re-characterise the consideration by employers of physical abilities. Instead of being instances of possible age discrimination such practices are re-characterised as being non-discrimination. Re-characterisation of experiences as non-discriminatory was identified by Ross (2000) as one way in which her participants denied being victims of discriminatory practices. This however is the first time that participants in the present study have been found to use this strategy. I will in the next section continue my examination of interviewees’ discursive strategies by considering their responses to a question which asked directly whether employers discriminate against older workers.



## ***Age discrimination against older workers***

In this final section I will look at the participants' responses to two related questions. The first of these asked whether employers discriminate against older workers. To this question, the interviewees responded in two ways. Some interviewees responded using the strategy of avoiding age discrimination, discussed in the last chapter. Other interviewees provided a short affirmative answer. Where the interviewees answered the first question in the affirmative, they were then asked why employers discriminate against older workers. For obvious reasons, this second question was not put to participants who did not claim that employers discriminate. One type of response was identified in relation to the second question, namely not accounting for age discrimination.

The extracts below accordingly comprise responses from some interviewees to the first question alone, and responses from other interviewees to both questions.

### ***Avoiding age discrimination***

Where the interviewees avoid any reference to age discrimination, they respond by describing the point of view of an employer. For example:

#### ***Extract 6.10***

CM: Do you think that employers in general do discriminate against older workers or older people?

FV: If an employer's choosing between a younger person and an older person, I suppose that I'd take the older person, who's got more experience, but there again you're

denying a younger person to get their first rung on the ladder as well, so who d'you take on, it must be difficult for an employer to choose (.) I'd go for the, the older person in some cases (.) but then again the older person might be set in their ways and, that might go against them during an interview, so it all depends on the (.) it's up to the, the employer, at the end of the day.

*Extract 6.11*

CM: Do you think employers do discriminate against older workers?

PO: Well I suppose (.) you've got to think of it from (.) everybody's point of view (.) yeah you're going to go for what you want. If you're going to pick something, you pick something that suits you, don't you (.) whether i::f (.) if you feel that (.) 'ach he's too old for it' (.) Yeah (.) don't say it's right but (.) 'cause I'm in this predicament at the moment (.) but e:m yeah (.) probably are right in the long run. They'll get what they want (.) okay somebody dips out (.) If the older guy gets the job the young fellow's dipping out or the younger person's dipping out (.) swings and roundabouts (.) I'm a great believer that (.) people have the right (.) to make their own decisions (.) yeah.

When asked whether employers discriminate against older workers, neither FV nor PO provides a definite positive or negative response to the question. Instead of offering his own view of whether employers discriminate, each speaker immediately orients to the view of a hypothetical employer. In Extract 6.10 FV begins his response 'if an employer's choosing between a younger person and an older person' while PO in Extract 6.11 states that 'you've got to think of it from (.) everybody's point of view'.

Each participant then describes the choice facing an employer and considerations involved in making that choice. One consideration described as relevant in each case is a factor which might operate against an older worker obtaining employment with the proposed employer. According to FV in Extract 8.10 'I'd go for the, the older person in some cases (.) but then again the older person might be set in their ways and that might go against them during an interview'. The claim that he would

employ an older person together with the suggestion that a factor might operate against employing the older person presents this as a balanced description. PO in Extract 8.11 offers a similarly balanced view, stating 'if you feel that (.) 'ach he's too old for it' (.) Yeah (.) don't say it's right but (.) 'cause I'm in this predicament at the moment(.) but e:m yeah (.) probably are right in the long run'. His discussion of what might or might not be 'right' together with the reference to his own situation also presents this as a balanced and unbiased view.

Another consideration claimed to be relevant in each case is the consequence which would follow for a younger worker if an older worker were to be preferred in selection. According to FV in Extract 6.10 his personal preference would be to 'take the older person' but this would have the effect of 'denying a younger person to get their first rung on the ladder'. In Extract 6.11 PO similarly argues that '(i)f the older guy gets the job . . . the younger person's dipping out'. In both extracts the speakers draw upon the notion that recruitment as a process is necessarily selective. In PO's words (Extract 6.11) it is a process of 'swings and roundabouts'. Both speakers thus claim that it is inevitable in recruitment that some job applicants will be unsuccessful and that this moreover is reasonable.

In addition to being constructed as reasonable, decisions to employ younger instead of older workers are claimed to be justified on other grounds. Employers, it is argued, have freedom of choice in deciding which job applicants to employ or not. FV in Extract 6.10 argues that 'it's up to the, the employer, at the end of the day', and PO in Extract 6.11 claims that 'I'm a great believer that (.) people have the right

(.) to make their own decisions'. Consequently the decisions of employers are claimed to be choices which they are entitled to make in relation to selection. In this way, they come to be viewed as matters within the remit of employers which should not be subject to dispute.

The practices operated by employers thus are claimed to reflect balance in the considerations taken into account and the employment consequences for younger workers. At the same it is not claimed that recruitment necessarily disadvantages older workers. Additionally, the decisions of who to employ are claimed to a matter for employers alone. By presenting their accounts from an employer's view, and suggesting that recruitment decisions are justified, both interviewees here are able to respond to the question asked without making any comment on the issue of age discrimination put to them. Their responses neither acknowledge nor deny that employers discriminate against older workers. The interviewees instead simply avoid the issue.

The question of age discrimination can also be avoided by claiming that other factors are relevant to an employer. For example:

*Extract 6.12*

CM: Do you think that in general employers do discriminate against older people?

SC: From the employer's eh point of view, I think he (.) well he sees a younger person who's got more years on their side and they inevitably tip the balance with the older person saying eh well I've had experience in that work but certainly if I was an employer I would come down I would come down on the side of the younger person because at the end of the day the employer's there for one purpose and one purpose only (.) his own profit.

SC also begins by orienting explicitly to the viewpoint of an employer and describing considerations relevant '(f)rom the employer's eh point of view'. Thereafter he attributes to both younger workers and older workers a characteristic relevant to employment. He states that 'a younger person [has] got more years on their side' and that the older person will say 'I've had experience in that work'. Each characteristic, 'more years' and 'experience', is additionally an attribute which give the person an advantage in looking for employment. SC suggests that the attribute of younger workers will 'tip the balance'. The implication here is that the employer will weigh up the advantages of each applicant in reaching a decision on selection.

The balanced consideration of such advantages however is not claimed to be the basis on which employers make their decisions. Instead SC claims that an employer, with whom he aligns himself, will prefer younger workers 'because at the end of the day the employer's there for one purpose and one purpose only (.) his own profit'. The basis suggested for the decision, namely 'profit', is not mentioned previously in the response. Nor does SC make it relevant to the characteristics which he has described earlier.

Here, the reasoning for the claim is not made explicit: no explanation is given as to why the employment of younger workers should lead to greater profit than the employment of older workers. Again though the effect of the claim is to provide a response which avoids any reference at all to the possibility of age discrimination.

SC neither acknowledges nor denies age discrimination in responding to the question asked.

### *Not accounting for age discrimination*

In Extracts 6.10 to 6.12 the speakers avoid the issue of age discrimination in their responses. According to other participants however, employers do discriminate against older workers. Where such claims were made, the interviewees were asked also about possible reasons for such discrimination. In response to this second question the participants do not treat age discrimination as an accountable matter, as seen in the following extracts:

#### *Extract 6.13*

CM: Do you think that employers in general do discriminate against older workers?

JHE: Yeah, I think they do.

CM: Why do employers discriminate against older workers?

JHE: Well, I've often wondered about this. E:m, some of it I feel, as I say is, is a wage thing and not, oh fair enough about wages and you know how that changes but certainly from what I've seen from a sixteen year old's wages and things like that, they're absolutely abysmal, ha, in general (.) so if (.) you can hire a seventeen, eighteen year old and pay them like, two fifty an hour, as opposed to having to pay somebody else five or six pounds an hour, then it's economics to some degree or other, I would have said, e::m, that's capitalism for you, I suppose.

#### *Extract 6.14*

CM: Do you think that in general employers do discriminate against older people?

JBR: Oh yes definitely, no doubt.

CM: Why might employers discriminate?

JBR: Uh possibly through fear (.) Em I've always said that perhaps they recognise that you could do their own job (.) but probably better than they could em and so they're not going to let someone into their organisation who's a threat to them (.) potentially a threat to them so obviously they're going to keep that person out (.)

They'd rather employ someone who's more malleable and eh (.) who won't stand up to (.) stand up for themselves and eh (.) who doesn't really eh know mu- too much eh, is easily bullied or (.) em (.) well makes a good subordinate perhaps. Eh they wouldn't take on someone who em (.) would stand up for themselves or (.) wouldn't eh take a lot of nonsense from them eh and who probably knows more about (.) the workings of the job maybe than they do. So again fear might be (.) one factor why they don't (.) eh go for older people.

In the extracts above each of the interviewees provides a short affirmative response to the first question. When asked whether employers discriminate, JHE in Extract 6.13 responds 'Yeah, I think they do' and JBR in Extract 6.14 responds 'Oh yes definitely, no doubt'. Neither interviewees spontaneously offers an account for his response, unlike the speakers in Extracts 6.10 to 6.12. This suggests that the claims for age discrimination are not treated by these interviewees as being accountable matters.

In response to the second question, when the interviewees are prompted to produce an account, each speaker offers her or his own view of age discrimination. JHE in Extract 6.13 states that 'I've often wondered about this' and in Extract 6.14 JBR responds 'I've always said that perhaps'. In each case, the response indicates that the speaker is offering a personal view. At the same time it suggests that the account to be offered results from much previous consideration but that the speaker has not reached a conclusive view of the issue.

The description which follows in each case comprises two aspects. Firstly, each interviewee makes relevant one criterion related to employment. In Extract 6.13 JHE refers to 'a wage thing' while JBR in Extract 6.14 refers to 'fear'. Secondly, each

speaker draws upon the criterion described to attribute to younger workers a characteristic which makes them more attractive to employers. According to JHE in Extract 6.13 'you can hire a seventeen, eighteen year old and pay them like, two fifty an hour, as opposed to having to pay somebody else five or six pounds an hour'. The difference in wage rates, she argues, leads to younger workers working for 'abysmal' rates of pay whereas others would command a higher value. In Extract 6.14 JBR argues that older workers are viewed by employers as 'potentially a threat to them so obviously they're going to keep that person out (.) They'd rather employ someone who's more malleable'. According to this argument, younger workers are more attractive to employers because they are not seen as a threat in the way that older workers are seen and do not give rise to the 'fear' mentioned earlier.

Discrimination against older workers consequently is argued to result from the greater attractiveness of younger workers to employers on the criterion which is described. In Extract 6.13 JHE suggests that age discrimination lies in 'economics to some degree or another . . . that's capitalism for you'. The explanation for discrimination thus becomes a purely financial one. JBR in Extract 6.14 argues that '[employers] wouldn't take on someone who . . . probably knows more about (.) the workings of the job maybe than they do'. Discrimination against older workers accordingly is claimed to result from the 'fear' described earlier in his response.

In addition to suggesting a reason for age discrimination, the attribution here of characteristics to younger workers has the effect also of attributing characteristics to older workers. Older workers come to be seen as people who would not work for



'abysmal' rates of pay in Extract 6.13 and as people who employers 'fear' in Extract 6.14. Although these characteristics are claimed to make older workers less attractive in employment terms, they nonetheless suggest value and ability as workers. As in many of the extracts considered previously, the interviewees here clearly have a potential stake in the claims being made for age discrimination and for these relative qualities of older workers. One means again of attending to the possibility of challenge is the non-alignment of the speaker with the group being described. JHE refers to 'somebody else' in Extract 6.13 and JBR to 'you' and 'someone' in Extract 6.14.

The claims here are further protected by the terms in which the descriptions are offered. Although each of JHE and JBR offers a reason for age discrimination, this reason in each case is proposed as a partial and not a complete explanation. In Extract 6.13 JHE argues that wages are 'some of it I feel' and 'to some degree or other'. Similarly JBR in Extract 6.14 suggests that fear 'might be (.) one factor'. The effect in each case is to attend to the possibility of challenge. As discussed in relation to earlier extracts, one way of undermining claims is to produce information which runs contrary to the claim which is being made (Potter, 1996b). Offering partial claims, as found here, protects them against this sort of challenge in that any further information can be readily incorporated if necessary without jeopardising the original claim. As a result, even if it were suggested that age discrimination involves factors other than those described, JHE and JBR could still maintain the partial explanations provided in these responses.

While the use of partial explanations protects the claims being made, here it also works in a second way. As seen in their responses to the first question asked, JHE and JBR do not spontaneously provide accounts for their claims that employers discriminate. The partial accounts identified here suggest that, even when prompted, the speakers here do not treat age discrimination as something for which they have fully to account. These responses, along with the brief initial responses, suggest that for these interviewees age discrimination by employers is not an accountable matter.

A lack of accounting for age discrimination is evident also in Extract 6.15:

*Extract 6.15*

CM: Do you think that in general employers do discriminate against older people?

HF: Yes, yeah I mean I think I'm quite convinced of that (.)

CM: Why do you think they might discriminate?

HF: I think there there's a kneejerk perception that you're going to be more expensive to employ. I think there's a (.) and if you try to pin that down (.) I don't think people I think people would find it very hard to actually be specific in what way you're going to be more expensive em (.) I think there's also a feeling that you might have (.) illness . . . are you suddenly you know be brutal going to disappear with em eh (.) something very serious like a cancer or (.) something that eh you're going to develop th- th- this is sort of this is middle age is when you're going to develop these long-term serious illnesses where they're going to have to be paying you health benefits. I think that that em eh I think they do see you as more problematical more problematic to employ (.) em (.) I do think there is a perception maybe that creativity and energy (.) is e:h going to be in some way diminished eh. (.) There's never eh any evidence for that . . . I think perhaps too though I think there's an element em did strike me in this one particular interview that I had that (.) there is a chance that you have developed some points of view (.) being older (.) I (.) I wonder if people find and it goes back to this thing about (.) maybe this belief that you can mould someone younger into your (.) corporate image or something.

HF also begins by providing a brief answer to the first question, stating '(y)es, yeah I mean I think I'm quite convinced of that'. In response to the subsequent question, she canvasses five possible reasons for age discrimination.

The first reason offered is that 'there's a kneejerk perception that you're going to be more expensive to employ'. This possibility she rejects on the grounds that 'people would find it very hard to actually be specific in what way you're going to be more expensive'. The implication of this challenge is that such a 'perception' has no substantive basis to it and is no more than an unfounded view. A second possibility raised is that 'there's also a feeling that you might have (.) illness', which HF goes on to develop in more detail. HF does not explicitly resist this suggestion. 'Feeling' however implies that the basis of any such possibility is emotive rather than factual and again casts doubt on the status of this factor. Her third possibility is 'I think they do see you as more problematical more problematic to employ'. In relation to this notion, HF does not provide any further detail nor does she resist the suggestion. In proposing it though as an employer's view, she implies that it too is unfounded. Fourthly, she suggests that 'there is a perception maybe that creativity and energy (.) is e:h going to be in some way diminished'. 'Perception' again suggests that this possibility is no more than a view of employers. HF then explicitly claims that it has no basis beyond this, in stating '(t)here's never eh any evidence for that'. The last possibility raised is that 'there is a chance that you have developed some points of view'. It is not however immediately clear what is being suggested. HF then expands on this suggestion by stating how the characteristic might favour younger workers. She states that there is 'maybe this belief that you can mould someone

younger into your (.) corporate image or something'. The suggestion here is that younger workers will be more attractive to employers in being integrated more easily into an organisation. HF does not explicitly comment on this possibility. Again though 'belief' implies that any basis for the suggestion is emotive and not factual and thereby questions the status of the view.

By the end of her response, HF has resisted in various ways all of the possible reasons which have been suggested. The effect is to leave age discrimination wholly unexplained. Taken along with her brief response to the initial question, the lack of any account in this response shows that HF also does not treat age discrimination as an accountable issue.

In Extract 6.16, JB makes explicit his lack of accountability for discrimination:

*Extract 6.16*

CM: Do you think that in general employers do discriminate against older workers?

JB: I do think yes, I do think they (.) it looks that way.

CM: Why do employers discriminate against older workers?

JB: A:h well (.) perhaps presentation but again I haven't even had a chance of an interview really (.) to present myself to a prospective employer, it hasn't even got at that stage em (.) and as I say my paperwork seems to be reasonably (.) up to scratch so what other reason could there be eh (.) Maybe I'm addressing the wrong type of job or looking in the wrong areas of the labour market (.) I'm not sure eh. But again the jobcentres and all the advice I've been given points me into that area, administration, em research which I'd like to do (CM: mm hm) having I'd like to do something that's related to the degree I've got ideally but obviously I'll do general administration, civil service whichever (.) I've applied for several (.) jobs including a research specialist at the Scottish Office for this new parliament, four posts going for that (.) em (.) But again eh (.) I I must admit I I'm baffled at times (.) as to why I'm not getting the results, not even up to the interview stage. Perhaps your in-re-researches may throw up some (.) eh reasons why (.) in your discussions with the employers later.

After his initial affirmative response, JB similarly is asked to explain discriminatory practices. However, instead of orienting to discrimination in general JB describes his own search for employment. In the course of his description, JB suggests two possible explanations for his lack of success in obtaining work.

The first possibility raised is 'perhaps presentation'. This suggestion remains ambiguous, in that 'presentation' potentially might refer either to JB himself or to the job applications which he submits. He immediately attends however to both possibilities, in arguing that 'I haven't even had a chance of an interview really (.) to present myself to a prospective employer, it hasn't even got at that stage em (.) and as I say my paperwork seems to be reasonably (.) up to scratch'. '(P)resentation' of JB himself is thereby ruled out as a possible explanation on the basis that the context of an interview, in which such presentation might be relevant, has not occurred. The inapplicability of this explanation thus becomes indisputable. The second possibility, that the presentation of his job applications explains his lack of success, is resisted in moderate terms. Here though, JB adds rhetorical weight to his argument by the use of a three-part list (Jefferson, 1991). The use of this device allows JB to suggest that all three parts of the list share a common feature. As a result, his final rejection of paperwork presentation as an explanation is heard as being as supported as those relating to personal presentation. JB then provides an upshot (Heritage and Watson, 1979) of this first possible explanation and his rejection of it in asking 'what other reason could there be'. The effect of this upshot is to provide the conclusion that the possibility of 'presentation' has been firmly

dismissed and that age discrimination remains the most likely explanation for his lack of employment.

JB's second suggestion is that '(m)aybe I'm addressing the wrong type of job or looking in the wrong areas of the labour market (.) I'm not sure'. This possibility is not explicitly rejected. JB however states that 'the jobcentres and all the advice I've been given points me into that area'. By claiming that his search for work has followed the advice of people who are familiar with the employment context JB implicitly rejects the possible explanation that he has been applying for 'the wrong type of job'. This rejection is then reinforced by JB 's statement that 'I'll do general administration, civil service whichever'. The three-part list here emphasises the breadth of work which JB would be willing to take on. This claim that he is willing to work in a range of jobs counters the possibility that his jobsearch has been narrowly focussed. Implicitly therefore, it acts as a rejecting of the explanation raised earlier. As a result, his unemployment remains unexplained by factors other than age discrimination.

Finally, JB provides a further upshot to his entire response, stating 'I must admit I I I'm baffled at times (.) as to why I'm not getting the results, not even up to the interview stage'. In doing so, he concludes that neither of the possibilities raised earlier account for his lack of success in finding work. Together with his brief initial response, this again suggests that JB does not treat age discrimination as an accountable matter. However here he explicitly addresses accountability in stating '(p)erhaps your in- re- researches may throw up some (.) eh reasons why (.) in your

discussions with the employers later'. According to JB, the onus for accounting for discrimination rests with employers. As a consequence, he is not required to account for the discriminatory practices of others.

## ***Discussion***

In this chapter, I have examined the interviewees' responses to the questions on the suitability of jobs for workers of different ages, whether there were any circumstances in which age discrimination might be justified and whether employers discriminate against older workers. Interviewees who claimed that employers do discriminate against older workers were in addition asked to provide reasons for such practice. In the responses, the two issues identified in the last two chapters are again apparent. These were the issue of identities and how they relate to the participants in this study, discussed in Chapter Four, and the discursive strategies used by the participants, discussed in Chapter Five.

The question of identities becomes apparent in the responses to the question of suitability of jobs. As discussed in Chapter Five, when the interviewees were asked about changes in the jobs for which they would apply, they responded by describing restrictions on the jobs available to them. Regardless of whether the restrictions were attributed to age discrimination or to personal factors, they nonetheless remain restrictions. The interviewees when they were asked a similar question about suitability of jobs in general responded somewhat differently. As seen in the responses considered in this chapter, the participants responded by claiming that

some jobs are more suitable for older workers or by minimising the advantages of younger workers. Any advantage for younger workers was limited to a very narrow range of jobs.

The differences between these two sets of responses again illustrate the importance of identities and their investigation. Older workers and their suitability for jobs were found to be constructed quite differently from the identities which the participants construct for themselves. It cannot therefore be assumed that answers produced in response to general questions bear any relationship to those given in response to questions concerning the interviewee personally. Rather, identities have to be viewed as the resources of the participants (Widdicombe, 1998).

At the same time, identities are not negotiated in the abstract. They rather are bound up with other discursive actions and context. As seen here, they are inextricably linked to matters of stake, age discrimination and other factors. What the present findings show is the importance of analysing such uses of identity in their contexts instead of in decontextualised controlled settings. Only in this way can the analyst consider the subtle ways in which identities are constructed and deployed and examine what function is served by their construction.

The identities of the interviewees here are inevitably linked to age discrimination. In the last chapter I identified two discursive strategies used by participants in relation to discrimination. These were an age avoidance strategy and an age discrimination strategy. Both strategies are again evident in the responses considered here. Even



when they are asked directly whether employers discriminate against older workers, some interviewees respond without making any reference at all to age discrimination. Instead, they describe the considerations relevant from an employer's viewpoint and explain recruitment outcomes as either justified or as based on profit. By responding in these terms, they avoid any mention of age discrimination. Other interviewees, using an age discrimination strategy, directly claim that employers discriminate against older workers.

Two points should be noted from the use of these strategies here. First is the question of accountability. Participants using the avoidance strategy spontaneously produce accounts which refer to other factors. These factors are then claimed to account for the outcomes of selection processes. In her study of minority ethnic women, Ross (2000) found that her participants treated not facing racial discrimination as an accountable matter. The present interviewees similarly treat the avoidance of discrimination as something for which they have to account. Accountability for not facing discrimination therefore is not limited to one particular form. These findings suggest that accountability for an absence of discrimination might extend to discrimination in any form, although this remains to be seen.

Interviewees using an age discrimination strategy did not spontaneously offer accounts. Even when prompted, the speakers in their following responses did not account for discrimination. Indeed one interview explicitly redirected accountability to employers. Age discrimination was not treated as something for which the interviewees had to account.

The second point to note here is the effect of these responses. While they take very different forms, their effects are very similar: both types of response account for unemployment. In each case, any agency of the interviewee for his or her unemployment disappears. In the age avoidance accounts, recruitment decisions are constructed as being entirely within the remit of employers and their right to choose employees. There is by implication little that the participants can do to affect these choices. In addition, selection decisions are said to be made on grounds other than their abilities or characteristics. In this way, the interviewees accounted for being unemployed in ways which did not impact upon their own identities.

An age discrimination strategy similarly denies the agency of the interviewee in the recruitment process. To be a victim of age discrimination is to have no power or influence over selection processes. Again the grounds on which decisions are made have no consequences for the abilities or characteristics of the individual interviewees.

Both strategies then have the effect of accounting for unemployment in ways which leave intact the characteristics of the participants. In addition to these two strategies, a third strategy was identified in this chapter: re-characterising age discrimination. This was found in responses to the question of whether age discrimination might in any circumstance be justified. Its effect was to allow the participants to describe situations where age-related considerations might be relevant without categorising such practice as age discrimination. This strategy of denying discrimination was also

found by Ross (2000) in her study. What this identification of a different strategy suggests is that there is available to the present participants a range of discursive strategies and resources for constructing and orienting to age discrimination. These are found to be deployed in response to different questions and contexts. The interviewees' experience of and views of discrimination should be regarded not as static and fixed but instead actively constructed in the contexts of interaction.

The identities of older workers then come to be viewed as fluid and negotiated. In this, they can be seen as somewhat different from the occupants of social roles suggested by structural theorists such as Phillipson (1982) (see p. 58) or 'social dopes'. While older workers might on occasions be constructed as 'social dopes' in being unwitting victims of age discrimination, this is only one of a number of identities which are proposed for them. To reify this identity into a social role is to ignore the functions being served by such a claim as well as the many other identities constructed for older workers in different contexts. Instead these are more usefully viewed as actions. Moreover they are actions which allow individuals to make sense of their own identities, of the identities of others and of employers' practices in contexts of age discrimination and unemployment.

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## Chapter seven

# Employers and equal opportunities for older workers

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### *Introduction*

Having in the last three chapters considered the sense that that older jobseekers make of current employment and their own experiences of looking for work, I turn in this and the next chapter to the views of those on the other end of these practices, namely employers. Chapter Eight will examine employers' descriptions of the characteristics of older workers, and of their practices in relation to the recruitment of older jobseekers. In this Chapter, I will look firstly at the topic of equal opportunities in employment. Equal opportunities will be considered by examining both the written policies obtained from a range of organisations and interviewees' descriptions of equal opportunities in practice. Thereafter I will consider the extent to which equal opportunities practice is reflected in employment outcomes in these

organisations. In order to so, I examine the participants' descriptions of the workforces employed by their organisations and the accounts they provided for the age balances of these workforces.

### ***Age and equal opportunities policies***

As discussed earlier (Chapter One), over the last twenty years or so an ever increasing number of employers have introduced written equal opportunities policies within their organisations. Additionally, the Government in the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999) has encouraged employers to include age within such policies as part of good practice. In this chapter therefore, the first aspect of equal opportunities I will consider is the documentation produced by organisations themselves. The written policy documents supplied for this study varied considerably both in form and content. Here I will look at two aspects of the policies obtained, firstly the statements of equal opportunities policies applied by the organisations. Such statements comprised the only element common to all the documents which were obtained. The second aspect of such policies which I will consider is that of specific references made to age, wherever occurring in the written policies.

#### ***The scope of written policies***

One feature common to all the policies examined is a statement of the equal opportunities policy operating. Such a statement arguably is necessary for an

organisational document to be accepted at all as an equal opportunities policy. Many statements of policy are similar to that in Extract 7.1:

*Extract 7.1*

OP/3<sup>6</sup>: [organisation name] confirms its commitment to a comprehensive policy of equal opportunities in employment in which individuals are selected and treated on the basis of their relevant merits and abilities and are given equal opportunities within [organisation name]. The aim of this policy is to ensure that no job applicant or employee should receive less favourable treatment on any grounds not relevant to good employment practice.

Here there are three points to which I wish to draw attention. Firstly, the emphasis of OP/3's claim to commitment suggests a primary concern with processes of recruitment and employment rather than the outcomes of these processes. For example, references to the ways in which 'individuals are selected and treated' or to 'no job applicant or employee shall receive less favourable treatment' suggest a concern with ongoing processes and make no mention of the inclusion of marginalised groups within the organisation. Secondly, the commitment to equal opportunities is set out in very general terms. Although no reference is made to any possible grounds of discrimination, 'comprehensive policy', 'no job applicant or employee' and 'any grounds not relevant to good employment practice' all suggest a policy which is extremely wide in its application. Lastly, the phrase 'confirms its commitment' suggests that the commitment of OP/3 to the principle of equal opportunities predates the publication of the current written policy. OP/3 can

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<sup>6</sup> For organisational codes, please see Appendix 4.

thereby be heard as an employer who for some time has subscribed to equal opportunities for individuals who apply to it or who work for it.

Other statements provide more detail of factors relevant to the operation of the policy, for example:

*Extract 7.2*

GD/2: 2.1 [organisation name] is fully committed to the principle that staff will have equality of opportunity in employment and advancement on the basis of their ability to do the job.

2.2 It is important that all staff are aware of and carry out their responsibilities to ensure that everyone is treated fairly. It is our firm commitment that people will be considered for jobs or promotion, or other opportunities (e.g. training) on the basis of ability, irrespective of race, nationality, colour, ethnic or national origins, religion, sex, marriage, disability, sexual orientation, age or gender reassignment.

*Extract 7.3*

BO/1: [organisation name] intends to establish a culture and philosophy which recognises and rewards individual achievement and merit regardless of age, colour, disability, ethnic or national origin, gender, marital status, religion or sexual orientation. Every possible step will be taken to ensure that individuals are treated equally and fairly and that decisions on recruitment, selection, training, personal development and promotion are based solely on objective and job-related criteria.

GD/2 and BO/1 here also emphasise processes in employment rather than any outcomes of the operation of the policy in each case. More detail though is given in each case of the processes within the organisations which are covered by the policies. Thus, in Extract 7.2, although the initial reference to ‘everyone is treated fairly’ is rather vague the subsequent formulation ‘people will be considered for jobs or promotion, or other opportunities (e.g. training)’ provides more detail of the employment decisions to which the policy relates. Similarly, in Extract 7.3 ‘treated’

again is expanded by the subsequent reference to ‘decisions on recruitment, selection, training, personal development and promotion’.

Detail is given also of the forms of discrimination to be covered by the operation of each policy. Both Extract 7.2 and Extract 7.3 set out numerous grounds of possible discrimination in employment. The grounds specified in each case explicitly include ‘age’. Explicit inclusion of these grounds of possible discrimination, in each case, displays an awareness of them as potentially relevant factors in employment. By including age therefore, each of GD/2 and BO/1 shows an awareness on its part of age discrimination as a factor to be excluded from its employment processes.

Here it is the detail provided in each extract which presents the organisation’s claim as a convincing one. The detail displays an awareness of both processes and grounds of discrimination which potentially might be relevant and suggests an awareness on the part of each organisation of these as matters to be addressed by the policy. The question arises however of what awareness is demonstrated when factors do not receive specific mention in a policy.

*Extract 7.4*

OP/2: The aim of this policy is to ensure that no job applicant or employee should receive less favourable treatment on any grounds not relevant to good employment practice, such as political belief, gender, sexual orientation, marital or parental status, race or ethnic origin, colour, creed, disability, social or economic class.

*Extract 7.5*

LG/3: The aim of this policy is to ensure that that no job applicant or employee receives less favourable treatment on any grounds or conditions which cannot be justified, including race, nationality, colour, ethnic origin, gender, marital status and disability.



In Extracts 7.4 and 7.5 OP/2 and LG/3 each provide a list of possible grounds of discrimination which is preceded by an inclusive term. The use of 'such as' in Extract 7.4 and 'including' in Extract 7.5 in each case suggests that the list that follows is to be accepted as specification of examples rather than treated as an exhaustive list. In neither extract is age included among the examples subsequently provided. Each organisation, by not including age among the specific examples provided, does not display a particular awareness of the relevance of age discrimination to the policy.

Both organisations provide a general formulation of the aims of their policy. Thus, OP/2 states that 'no job applicant or employee should receive less favourable treatment' while LG/3 describes its aim in very similar terms. The place of age discrimination in relation to these aims however is left unclear due to the non-inclusion of age in the grounds which are specified in each policy. Although potentially covered by the initial inclusive term, age discrimination could as easily in each case fall outwith the scope of the organisation's aim for equal opportunities in employment.

The absence of any reference to age is not limited to the extracts above. Of the 29 documents (or sets of documents) obtained from employers for this study, less than half (13) make specific reference to age. While it is unwise to generalise from such a small sample, this finding is consistent with Cully et al's (1998) finding that only

40% of the employers surveyed in their study had in place policies which expressly mentioned age. The application of written policies to age discrimination in many organisations is consequently uncertain.

### *Qualifying age*

Even where it is explicitly included within the scope of a written policy, age in some instances does not receive the same treatment as other forms of discrimination. For example:

#### *Extract 7.6*

RC/3: We aim to be an equal opportunities employer. Our employment policy aims to ensure that no job applicant or employee receives less favourable treatment on the grounds of sex, marital status, ethnic origin, disability, age (within the constraints of our retirement policy), class, colour, creed, HIV AIDS status, personal circumstances, sexual orientation, or any other grounds which are unjustifiable, in terms of equality of opportunity for all.

RC/3 also follows a general claim initially ('(w)e aim to be an equal opportunities employer') with a statement of many grounds of possible discrimination in support of this claim. Age here is explicitly included among the grounds specified. Of all the grounds included however age is the only one which is expressly qualified within the claim ('age (within the constraints of our retirement policy)'). No detail is given within this equal opportunities policy of what these 'constraints' are nor what effect they might have on the application of the employment policy in relation to age discrimination.

All grounds other than age in Extract 7.6 are included unreservedly. Indeed, were RC/3 to refer to constraints in relation to say ethnic origin or disability, the two factors which precede age in the list, their claim to be aiming for equal opportunities would be heard as somewhat doubtful and open to challenge. That age alone of the factors specified is included in qualified terms marks it out different from other potential grounds of discrimination in being open to such qualification. Additionally, the inclusion of age in this way suggests that its qualification is regarded by RC/3 as unproblematic to their claim to be aiming for 'equality of opportunity for all'.

While the constraints on age remain unspecified in Extract 7.6, qualifications are made more explicit in other policies. Consider, for instance, the following extracts which include references to particular ages:

*Extract 7.7*

OP/1: [organisation name] is committed to ensuring good equal opportunity practices in relation to employment and will not discriminate, either directly or indirectly when recruiting staff. The following principles will therefore apply:

All vacant posts will be advertised, normally both externally and internally.

Job descriptions, person specifications, advertisements, application forms, shortlisting and interview procedures will use appropriate, unbiased and fair criteria.

With regard to age, the normal retirement age will be 65 and age will only be a factor relating to membership of the [organisation name] Pension Scheme.

*Extract 7.8*

LG/1: The main aims of the policy are:-

- (a) to promote equality of employment opportunities;
- (b) to eliminate unfair, unlawful or inappropriate discrimination in employment in [organisation name];

- (c) to ensure that no job applicant or employee is placed at a disadvantage by requirements or conditions which cannot be shown to be justifiable on objective job-related grounds;
- (d) to provide positive action measures where appropriate and permissible by legislation;
- (e) to apply relevant supportive employment procedures and practices and to develop appropriate training programmes;
- (f) to ensure that whilst it is [organisation name] practice to employ people between the ages of 16 and 65 that any other age limits should only be used if they are imposed by statute or can be shown to be essential for the job.

OP/1 and LG/1 above in support of their policies each offer a list of 'principles' or 'aims' relating to employment practice. The majority of these items in each case comprise statements relating to general employment practice within each organisation and make no reference to particular factors or grounds of possible discrimination. In each case the final item on the list refers specifically only to one possible basis of discrimination, age.

The first reference to age in each case refers to the age limits applicable to an employee of the organisation. This is provided in Extract 7.7 in relation to an upper age limit alone ('the normal retirement age will be 65'). LG/1 in Extract 7.8 includes both a lower and an upper age limit applied to employees of the organisation ('it is . . . practice to employ people between the ages of 16 and 65'). In neither case is any warrant provided for the inclusion of such age limits for employees.

Both OP/1 and LG/1 indicate that age might also be relevant to employment in other ways. According to OP/1, age is 'a factor relating to membership of the . . . Pension

Scheme', although the way or ways in which it will be relevant are unspecified here. LG/1 provide two other ways in which age might be relevant, firstly where age limits are 'imposed by statute' and secondly, where they 'can be shown to be essential for the job'. The relevance of age in these ways is treated as self-explanatory with no further detail being given.

Consequently, age in Extract 7.7 is made relevant to employment with the organisation in two ways, while in Extract 7.8 three possible uses of age are specified. No other possible ground of discrimination is mentioned at all in either policy. The inclusion and qualification of age in each case therefore again mark it out as being different from discrimination on any grounds. Further, the inclusion here of detailed qualifications of age again suggests that for each organisation these qualifications are regarded as unproblematic to their earlier stated principles and aims relating to equal opportunities in employment.

### *Age and written policies*

The place given to age in written equal opportunities policies is then somewhat ambivalent. While in some policies age is explicitly included among specified grounds of possible discrimination, other more general descriptions of aims potentially might or might not include age discrimination within the scope of the policy. Even where age is specifically included, it is in some policies made subject to qualifications. Such qualifications treat age differently from other forms of discrimination. The use of age in these ways also suggests that these qualifications

are not viewed by the organisations concerned as being detrimental to their claims in respect of equal opportunities in employment. These findings all suggest that there is a long way to go before age discrimination receives the level of attention in written equal opportunities policies advocated by the government in the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999).

### ***Equal opportunities in practice***

Two features of the written policies noted above were one, the often unspecified application of the policy to discrimination on grounds of age and, two, the emphasis in many policies on employment processes such as selection and treatment. None of the policies refers to the inclusion of workers from marginalised groups, such as older workers, within the organisation. Questions on these two topics were put to employers during the course of the interviews conducted for the study. Below, I will consider employers' descriptions of the workforces employed by their organisations and accounts for these workforces. I will start however by looking at their descriptions of the equal opportunities practices which their organisations operate.

### ***Commitment to equal opportunities***

One of the first questions of each interview asked the interviewee for details of the equal opportunities policy within his or her organisation.

*Extract 7.9*

CM: Could you tell me what sort of form [your equal opportunities policy] takes?

JS: It's something that we have put into place, we always had the procedures in place but it wasn't actually written down until fairly recently so it has been (.) we haven't had any issues with it at all in the past.

In Extract 7.9 JS responds initially by setting out the organisation's current position on equal opportunities, stating that a policy is 'something that we have put into place'. Following this, she draws a distinction between this formal policy and 'the procedures'. These procedures, although left unspecified, are by implication those appropriate to equal opportunities. Drawing this distinction here allows JS to suggest that a commitment to equal opportunities can be demonstrated in ways other than the existence of a written policy.

The distinction between the written policy and the procedures is further emphasised by a contrast between the length of time each has been in operation. Whereas the policy 'wasn't actually written down until fairly recently', JS claims that the procedures have 'always' been in place. The distinction between the two, and the contrast in the time for which they have operated, both function to suggest that the commitment to equal opportunities depends not on the written policy itself but on the procedures used within the organisation. As a result, the commitment of the organisation is claimed to go back beyond the recent introduction of the written policy to previous long-standing employment practices.

JS further emphasises the previous use of equal opportunities practices within her organisation in claiming 'we haven't had any issues with it at all in the past'. This is important because the introduction of a written policy at this time potentially might be problematic for any organisation concerned. It raises the possibility that the company in introducing it is simply responding to external pressures or is a recent convert to the principle of equal opportunities. Here JS explicitly counters this possibility by denying emphatically ('at all') any previous use of discriminatory practices. She thereby claims that her organisation has a well-established commitment to equal opportunities in employment.

A similar claim is to be found in Extract 7.10:

*Extract 2*

CM: Could you tell me what form your equal opportunities policy takes?

LL: We have an equal opportunities policy statement, e:m, and we are in the process of forming it into a full-blown policy etc. but I do say that we do we won't discriminate against ethnic origin, etc. etc. We don't include age at the moment, we're sort of, we are revising our handbook at the moment, we are inserting age and some other issues, to make it up front (.) I don't think we have discriminated against age per se in the past, but I do want it to be up front anyway.

LL above distinguishes between various aspects of equal opportunities practice. Firstly, the present position of the organisation ('(w)e have') is distinguished from the actions it is taking ('we are in the process of forming'). Secondly, the current documentation in the form of 'an equal opportunities statement' is distinguished from what will exist in the future, namely 'a full-blown policy'. The effect of this



dual contrast is to build up the status of the actions and future documentation of the organisation in relation to what exists at present.

While the contrast between the present and future positions of the organisation emphasises the scope of the future policy in describing it as 'full-blown', this at the same time suggests that what is in place at present might be lacking in some respects. This possibility is confirmed by LL in relation to age, in stating '(w)e don't include age at the moment'. One inference might be that age or other matters not presently included will not form part of equal opportunities practice prior to the introduction of the future policy. LL attends to such an inference in two ways. Firstly, she describes both past and current practice. With regard to previous practice, LL makes an explicit claim in relation to any possible age discrimination in the organisation, in stating 'I don't think we have discriminated against age per se in the past'. A less specific and wider claim is offered in relation to current practice by her statement 'I do say that we do we won't discriminate against ethnic origin etc. etc.'. Secondly, LL provides details of what matters presently excluded are to be included in the revised policy and 'handbook', namely 'age and some other issues'. Specifying these matters displays an ongoing awareness of them as factors relevant to equal opportunities. As a result, the change to be made by the organisation in introducing a new written policy will be to make existing practices transparent or 'up front' rather than to bring about any change in its commitment. The organisation's commitment to equal opportunities is heard as ongoing and as forming part of previous and current employment practices.

In Extracts 7.9 and 7.10 then, participants build up their organisations' enduring commitment to equal opportunities in situations where the company has recently introduced an equal opportunities policy or is in the process of forming a policy. An ongoing commitment to equal opportunities can also be claimed in other circumstances, as seen in Extract 7.11.

*Extract 7.11*

CM: Could you tell me a little about the policy and how it works?

JJ: If you look at our adverts in the paper or any of our internal adverts going with the company, you'll see that there's a sentence at the bottom saying that we are we are committed to equal opportunities (.) So that's how we that's as far as we've got, we don't have any documents, we do say that we will, we are committed to (.) we are not discriminating in any way (CM: right) um, to anybody that applies to us.

There are several points to note in Extract 7.11. Firstly, JJ does not immediately answer the question put to her but instead refers to advertisements used by the organisation. The breadth of the description provided of these advertisements, 'our adverts in the paper or any of our internal adverts going with the company' builds up the extent of what is follow. In referring thereafter to the 'sentence at the bottom saying that we are we are are committed to equal opportunities', JJ consequently claims a demonstrated public commitment by the organisation.

Secondly, 'as far as we've got' suggests that other steps will be taken in the future which go beyond the present position in relation to equal opportunities, restricted to statements in advertisements. The implication that the organisation will in time take

further action here emphasises its current commitment to equal opportunities and the ongoing nature of that position.

Lastly, JJ makes explicit the lack of any existing written policy in stating that 'we don't have any documents'. The lack of such a policy might be heard as casting doubt on the extent of the commitment claimed previously. By offering the extensive claim for current practices 'we are committed to (.) we are not discriminating in any way' JJ links the commitment of the organisation to the practices currently operated. Notwithstanding the absence of any written documentation therefore, JJ claims that her organisation is committed to equal opportunities in its practices relating to job applicants.

In the above extracts therefore, each participant seeks to establish her organisation's claim to be 'committed to equal opportunities' by reference to the employment procedures or practices actually utilised in the workplace. Although the implementation of a written policy has been widely promoted as the benchmark of an organisation's commitment to the principle of equal opportunities in employment, none of these participants seek to base the company's claim on the existence of a written policy. Regardless of whether a written policy exists, will shortly exist or doesn't exist each participant instead refers to past and continuing organisational employment practice as evidence of the organisation's commitment. In so doing, each participant links the organisation to the practices or procedures utilised in support of a claim to be committed to equal opportunities for older workers.

## *Age balance of the workforce*

The success of the voluntarist approach to addressing age discrimination in the workplace pursued by the UK Government rests largely on the acceptance and adoption by employers of the principle of equal opportunities for older workers. More than this however it requires that the principle is translated into employment practice in terms of the numbers of older workers employed in the workforce. Following their claims to be employers 'committed to equal opportunities', the participants were asked about the place of older workers within their organisations. Firstly, they were asked to describe the age balances of their workforces between the over 40s and younger workers. Their responses invariably offered descriptions in terms rather different from those of the question, for example:

### *Extract 7.12*

CM: What sort of age balance is there within [organisation name] between say, younger workers and the over 40's?

LL: A high percentage of the population is under 34 years old (.) I mean it is something like 70% of the organisation are under 30.

### *Extract 7.13*

CM: It's something that we've touched on before but (.) what sort of age balance is there in [organisation name] between say younger workers and over 40s?

JJ: I would say that predominately that people in their twenties um (.) people from, I would say about 23 to about 27. I can get you some stats and I can send them to you about where our age group lies but I'd say uh, probably (.) probably about 70 % are within that age range. Um (.) maybe that's 65, I would say about 65 to 70% I'd say for that range. And the rest are then spread (.) upwards from that.

The question in Extracts 7.12 and 7.13 asks about the age balance of the participant's workforce invoking two categories of workers, namely younger workers and the over 40s. These categories are somewhat arbitrary, given that discrimination on the grounds of age can affect workers of any age and that many younger workers as well as older workers report having experienced age discrimination (Loretto, Duncan and White, 2000). Research however suggests that over the course of the Twentieth century age discrimination in employment was most commonly experienced by the over 40s (e.g. Employers Forum on Age, 2000b; Stearns, 1975) and the participants were therefore invited to describe their workforces in those terms.

The first point to be noted about each response is that neither LL nor JJ refers to the categories suggested by the question. Asked about the balance of workers aged over 40 and of younger ages, each interviewee instead describes a different age group of workers. Thus, LL refers to people 'under 34 years old' while JJ responds in terms of 'people in their twenties'. These descriptions are then revised, that in Extract 7.12 to those 'under 30' and that in Extract 7.13 to 'people from I would say about 23 to 27'.

Secondly, the interviewees then each provide a description of the proportion of the workforce which is included in the revised category that has been suggested. LL describes 'something like 70%' of the workforce of her organisation as coming within the category of 'under 30'. Similarly JJ states that "probably about 70%" of the workforce are in the age range she has proposed. This figure is itself also revised to "about 65 to 70%".

A third point to note in each response is the combination of vague and apparently precise terms. Whereas in Extract 7.12 'a high percentage' appears vague, the choice of '34' (rather than say '30') as an initial age of reference suggests that more precise information is being provided. Similarly, in Extract 7.13, 'about 23 to about 27' conveys a sense of detail albeit qualified.

Here the revisions of their initial descriptions and the of combination of vague and precise terms allows both LL and JJ to describe their workforces while reducing the scope for challenge (Potter, 1996b). Revising the initial suggestions can be heard as indicating that each interviewee is giving careful consideration to the question and builds up the facticity of the response. In addition, each response is further protected by the use of vague and specific terms. A more general description in either case, such as 'something like three-quarters', might be heard as too vague coming as it does from someone responsible for recruiting and managing the workforce of the company. Precise descriptions on the other hand, for instance '75% are under 34', would leave the participant more open to subsequent challenge on the basis of the age balance described. The use of both vague and specific terms allows each participant to provide a description of the age balance of the organisation, which she might be expected to know, and at the same time leaves it open to further revision should that be necessary.

The interviewees then respond to the question by describing the proportion of the workforce that comes within a younger age group which is proposed. Their

descriptions of these groups and workers are presented in ways which reduce the scope for challenge. In each case the effect is to allow the interviewee to describe her workforce without any reference to the number of older workers employed by the organisation. The description given in each case suggests that the workforce comprises predominantly younger workers. Both LL and JJ however are able to leave implicit rather than make explicit in their responses the low numbers or proportions of older workers employed within these organisations.

Other responses also provide little information on the numbers of older workers employed by the organisation.

*Extract 7.14*

CM: How would you describe the age balance in [organisation name] between say the over 40s and younger workers?

JS: I would say probably about 50% of the call centre are about 30 or under. Erm, certainly in terms of call centre, obviously that's different for manager level, supervisor level or whatever, erm, about another, I don't know.

In Extract 7.14, JS begins similarly by offering a description of the younger employees in her organisation, here those aged 'about 30 or under'. The proportion of the workforce within this age group, '*probably about 50%*', is again given in rather vague terms.

Here JS introduces a different element into the response, namely that the description offered relates to 'the call centre'. This suggests that the age balance described relates only to one part of the organisation. Indeed, JS explicitly contrasts the work

to which her previous description relates from other types of work in the company, such as 'manager level, supervisor level or whatever'. '(L)evel' moreover indicates that these are not just other types of employment but are also more senior jobs within the organisation. For these jobs, the age balance is claimed to be 'obviously different' from that described earlier. Although not within JS's detailed knowledge ('I don't know') the claim is presented as being self-evidently correct and consequently protected from challenge.

As a result, the details given for workers in the call centre are presented as being unrepresentative of the organisation as a whole. The response suggests that over the organisation the age balance between older and younger workers is reasonable. Again though it allows JS, like LL and JJ above, to describe the age balance of the workforce while providing no information as to the number of older workers employed within her organisation.

### *Accounting for the age balance*

As seen above, when asked about equal opportunities policies the participants make explicit claims that their organisations are 'committed to equal opportunities'. The descriptions provided for the age balances of the workforces though make no reference to the employment of older workers within these organisations. In view of the apparent inconsistency between the claims to commitment and their descriptions of the age balances of the workforces, participants were asked to account for the age balances which they described. Three ways of accounting for the existing age



balances were identified from their responses. These accounts referred to (1) the actions of older workers / jobseekers; (2) the workers who find the job appropriate or not appropriate, and (3) the selection procedures used and how they relate to jobseekers.

(1) the actions of older workers / jobseekers:

The first type of account identified related to the actions of older workers or older jobseekers themselves, for example:

*Extract 7.15*

CM: Why do you think there is that age balance within [organisation name]?

SM: It's just the way it works out that we do take in (.)maybe more the 20-30s, late 20s, 30s, early 40s, maybe not so many in their 50s but that could easily just be because we don't have so many applying in that age group.

SM above offers a qualified contrast ('maybe') between the people employed within her organisation and those not included within it to the same extent. Each group is described in terms of the age ranges of individuals involved. In addition she refers to four groups of workers who are represented, comprising 'the 20-30s, late 20s, 30s, early 40s', against one group less represented, namely those 'in their 50s'. Here the greater number of examples provided for workers who are employed, in contrast to the single example of those not employed, emphasises the inclusiveness of the organisation's practices in relation to the majority of workers.

Two accounts are provided for the relative absence of workers from the second group ('in their 50s'). The first of these is that '(i)t's just the way it works out'. This account draws upon an idiomatic expression which avoids attributing the age balance to any particular or planned factors in company practice. Idiomatic expressions are commonly to be found at points of conversations where the listener is unlikely to support or is withholding agreement with what is being said by the speaker (Drew and Holt, 1989). Their robust nature makes idioms difficult to challenge with specific or contrary information and they accordingly are often useful in situations of conflict or absence of support. The strength of the expression here is bolstered further by the use of 'just'. Just is a particle which is open to a range of at least four meanings in different contexts, as observed by Lee (1987). One such meaning he terms 'the emphatic meaning', found in situations where it is deployed to reinforce a general argument. The use of just here and the idiomatic nature of the account provided strengthen SM's claim that the age balance in the organisation results from unplanned factors and make it robust to possible challenge.

So general an account though could be heard as somewhat vague coming from a person responsible for recruiting personnel for the organisation and who could reasonably be expected to know how the process operates. Additionally, it leaves open the possibility of discriminatory practice by the organisation. SM then proposes a second and more specific account in terms of the job applications which are received, namely 'that could easily just be because we don't have so many applying in that age group'. 'Just' here rather than emphasising the account provided, draws upon the 'depreciatory meaning' identified by Lee (1987). The

effect of this to present this account as a tentative one, displaying a willingness on the part SM as an employer to consider any possible reasons for the age balance within the organisation. At the same time it implicitly denies any discrimination against older workers. The lack of older workers is accounted for in terms of factors unplanned by the organisation and possibly originating with older jobseekers themselves, in that they simply do not apply to the company for jobs.

A lack of applications from older jobseekers is implicit in the following account:

*Extract 7.16*

CM: Why do you think there is that age balance?

SA: I think partly due to (.)us not deliberately going out and saying we are looking to recruit older people, which has its dangers itself.

Here SA also offers a tentative account for the age balance within the organisation ('I think partly'). This time the account provided does refer to the organisation itself and its possible lack of action, as SA refers to 'us not deliberately going out and saying'. The lack of the action described however is justified by reference to 'dangers'. Although unspecified, the implication is that these 'dangers' prevent SA's organisation from taking such a step and thus present its current position as being reasonable in the circumstances. Its failure to act in this situation is thus mitigated.

Providing this mitigation for the organisation's position has consequences also for the account in other ways. Implicit in the claim that such action would be required on the part of the company to address the age balance is the suggestion that without

this action older jobseekers do not apply to it for employment. With the company unable to take further action for justifiable reasons, the age balance of the workforce becomes accounted for in terms of a current lack of applications from older jobseekers.

The age balance can be accounted for in terms of actions of older workers other than non-application:

*Extract 7.17*

CM: Why is there that age balance in [organisation name]?

LL: We're still suffering because the older ones all left you know, a couple of years ago on early retirement er (.) and certainly now the population is too young erm, for the type of work that we're asking them to do.

LL in Extract 7.17 does not answer the question immediately but starts with a description of the current state of the organisation. 'We're still suffering' is a heard an indication that what is to follow is contrary to the organisational policy or desires. She then offers an account for the position of the organisation and of the age balance within it. This refers explicitly to the actions of the older workers there previously in leaving the organisation, stating that 'the older ones all left you know'.

As an account though this has potential difficulties in that it immediately raises the question of why these workers left. A common reason given for older workers leaving an organisation is the use of discriminatory practices by the employer, such as the systematic targeting of older age groups for redundancies. LL accordingly

goes on to provide an alternative reason for the departure of the older employees, namely 'early retirement'.

Finally, LL offers a description of those presently employed and of the attitude of the organisation towards the age balance of its workforce ('certainly now the population is too young erm, for the type of work that we're asking them to do'). The absence of older workers in their workforce becomes a matter of regret and ongoing dissatisfaction for the company.

Throughout the extract, LL attends to the accountability of the organisation for the composition of the current workforce. The emphasis on the current state of the organisation and its view of its present workforce construct the absence of older workers as contrary to the requirements and desires of her organisation. Their absence instead is accounted for again in terms of the actions of older workers themselves, here in relation to the departure of those who were employed previously.

(2) the workers who find the job appropriate or not appropriate:

A second way of accounting identified from the responses referred to jobs and the workers who would find these jobs appropriate or not appropriate, for example:

*Extract 7.18*

CM: Why do you think there is that sort of age balance?

JS: Generally it's quite a young, because of the industry, because itself call centres are a very young industry that a lot of people who are coming into it are coming in as their first or second jobs.

JS in Extract 7.18 describes call centres as 'a very young industry'. While this description suggests that this work has become available only recently, it can be heard as referring also to the people employed in such work. Those employed in this work are stated to be people 'coming in as their first or second jobs'. By describing the industry and its employees in these ways, JS is able to avoid claiming that the jobs are only appropriate for young people or that older workers could not come into them. Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of the description of the jobs and the description of those who do these jobs implies that the jobs are suitable for young people and functions as an account for the low representation of older workers within the organisation.

A more explicit description of the position of older workers in relation to jobs is found in Extract 7.19:

*Extract 7.19*

CM: Why is there that age balance in [organisation name]?

LL: Our jobs do hold you to certain targets, there's expectations and objectives set etc. etc. and possibly an older person might find that their frame of mind is that they just want to go in, do something that they do, whatever it is they're doing and go away at the end of the day, 'I don't want to get involved with these' whatever (CM: mm hm) whereas obviously em, we have got sort of say targets and objectives and individual objectives and etc. (.) and I think some people often are put off by that.

Firstly, LL offers a description of particular elements of the jobs within the organisation, stating that 'our jobs do hold you to certain targets, there's expectations and objectives set etc. etc.'. This is followed by a statement of how these elements of the job might relate to older workers or jobseekers. The view proposed is suggested not as that of LL but instead that of a hypothetical older worker. Reported speech ('I don't want to get involved with these') here is used to develop this attribution as being distanced from LL herself and present it as a credible account of another person's view of the situation. In addition, the view proposed by LL is put forward in heavily qualified terms ('*possibly* an older worker *might* find'). As a consequence, the claim is less open to challenge as the pre-conceived view of LL towards older workers and their suitability for particular jobs.

LL argues that the 'frame of mind' of older workers themselves will lead to them seeking employment other than that previously described. Instead, it is claimed that they will prefer jobs with less onerous duties. The tasks involved in such other jobs are downplayed, one by the vagueness of the description provided ('something that they do'), and two again by the use of the 'depreciatory' 'just' (Lee, 1987). As a result, the requirements of such jobs are proposed to be less demanding than those of the jobs set out initially. The view attributed by LL to an older worker is thus presented as one which would prefer jobs which are less onerous than the jobs available with her organisation.

Finally, the view attributed to older workers and ways in which they are said to relate to other jobs are contrasted with a further description of the requirements of the jobs with LL's organisation. These requirements are emphasised as comprising 'targets and objectives and individual objectives'. The emphasised requirements are then claimed to put off 'some people' from this type of work. Although unspecified, following LL's earlier reference to an older person 'some people' is heard as referring to older workers in this situation.

The response thus functions as a claim that older workers do not find the jobs with LL's organisation appropriate for them. Nowhere does she state the jobs are unsuitable for older workers due to job-related factors or for other reasons. Again however the description of the jobs taken along with the view attributed to a potential older worker can be heard as an account for the absence of older workers from the organisation.

### (3) selection procedures and how they relate to jobseekers:

A further way of accounting for the age balance of a workforce focuses on descriptions of selection procedures and how they relate to jobseekers of different ages, as seen below.

#### *Extract 7.20*

CM: Why is there that age balance, do you think?

PA: I don't think it has anything to do with the way they come through the recruitment process because as soon as we receive an application age isn't considered and it is not considered right the way through the process. So it has to be something before



then that is stopping people applying to us. Either that or the things that we are rejecting people throughout the process on the basis of is indirectly maybe sometimes linked to age, I don't know whether that might be experience, erm, or technology, being able to use a computer, I don't know what, but it could be something like that indirectly affecting it.

Here PA provides a three-part response to account for the age balance in his organisation. He begins by stating that he doesn't think the age balance 'has anything to do with the recruitment process' and repeatedly denies any use of age in this process in claiming that 'age isn't considered and it is not considered right the way through the process'. The organisation consequently is distanced from any discriminatory practice in recruitment on the grounds of age.

Following this claim, PA considers other ways in which age might enter the process. The first of these again suggests that the lack of older workers might stem from the absence of applications from this age group ('something . . . is stopping people applying to us'). No further detail is given of this possible 'something', nor of its effects on potential applicants.

In canvassing potential explanations, PA then raises another possibility, namely that age might be otherwise linked in to the recruitment process. Having made the initial claim that his company does not consider age during the recruitment process, this allows him to explore the possibility that it enters the process other than by the design of the organisation. This possibility is suggested in terms which are very qualified ('*indirectly maybe sometimes* linked to age'). Age, it is suggested, may be linked to factors in the process such as 'experience, erm, or technology, being able

to use a computer' although the link and why it should favour younger applicants is not made explicit.

For an employer, however, knowing that even indirect age discrimination was operating would raise the issue of accountability for the processes operated. PA thus distances himself from knowledge of how age is relevant to the process in his final statement, 'I don't know what, but it could be something like that indirectly affecting it'. Consequently the lack of older workers within the organisation is claimed not to arise through any actions on the part of his organisation as an employer nor through the operation of any other factor of which he is aware. Instead the age balance is accounted for in terms of some unknown and unplanned aspect of an otherwise appropriate recruitment process and its effects on older jobseekers.

As discussed above, participants account for the age balances within their workforces in three ways. Firstly, the age balance can be simply attributed to the actions of older workers and jobseekers, such as not applying to or voluntarily leaving an organisation. Secondly, participants can offer a description of (some elements of) the job and a description of people who find it suitable or not suitable. In these cases the jobs are not specifically stated to be appropriate for younger applicants or inappropriate for older applicants although the account functions in this way. Lastly, the lack of older workers can be said to originate in indirect aspects of an otherwise reasonable recruitment process. In this case the precise factors operating against older applicants are unknown and unplanned by the employer.

## Combining accounts

These different accounts, as seen above, are not mutually exclusive. PA in Extract 7.20 accounts for the age balance in his company both by reference to a lack of applications from older jobseekers and by reference to aspects of the selection process. Similarly LL in Extracts 7.17 and 7.19 draws upon both the choice of older workers to leave and a description of the job and why older workers might find it unsuitable. During the interviews, participants were found to offer more than one account for the age balance of their workforce within a single response, for example:

### *Extract 7.21*

CM: Why do you have that age balance in [organisation name]?

JJ: One cause e:m, (.) there's probably more people that age group one looking for a job. Two, it's a call centre environment which maybe does attract more to the younger (.) younger generation, just because it is very e:m, fast paced, it's shift work. E:m it's a (.) job where you can maybe only see yourself doing three years. . . Erm, (.) again the selection process could put people off . . . I would say maybe more young people use our selection tools (.) and that's why we have to make sure that our selection tools don't discriminate, erm, (.) but again the skills that we need and the level of competency that we need, that we require for somebody to do the job well and to do it (.) and be able to perform the task is er (.) they have to get through these validated tools.

JJ in Extract 7.21 gives an response which incorporates all three of the accounts seen above. Firstly, she offers a description of the majority of jobseekers in stating that 'there's probably more people that age group one looking for a job'. Although this makes no explicit mention of the age group in question, it is heard as referring to younger workers following her earlier description of the age balance of the workforce. Implicitly therefore it is claimed that fewer older people apply to the

company for employment. The age balance thus is attributed to a lack of applications from older workers.

A second way of accounting is found in her subsequent description of elements of the job ('call centre environment', 'very e:m, fast paced, it's shift work') and the description of those who might find the job appropriate ('maybe does attract more to the younger (.) younger generation'). These factors are then combined in a further description ('it's a job where you can maybe only see yourself doing three years'). The implication here is that the elements described earlier make the job attractive only for such a period. JJ does not state that the jobs are appropriate only for younger people, nor that older workers would not want a job for 'only' three years, but the account nonetheless suggests that these jobs are suitable for younger rather than older employees.

The remainder of the response is taken up with a description of the selection process. JJ suggests that the procedures and tools used by the organisation in selection might deter job applicants ('could put people off'). As in Extract 7.20, the group disadvantaged by the process is described in general terms as 'people', with no reference to age. Again though, this description is heard as referring to older people following the references to jobs appropriate for 'younger' people. While the selection tools used by the company might disadvantage older job applicants, JJ offers a three part warrant for their use. Firstly, she makes the general claim that the organisation has to make sure the tools do not discriminate. Such a claim though might be considered fairly weak following a suggestion that they operate against

older applicants. JJ therefore offers a second warrant, that the tools are necessary to identify 'the skills that we need and the level of competency that we need' for the jobs. While perhaps more persuasive than her previous claim, this is still potentially open to attack on the basis that other non-discriminatory selection tools might be available. Finally, JJ provides a further warrant for existing recruitment practice, namely that the tools are 'validated'. The status of the tools and their use here become distanced from JJ and the company. 'Validated' indicates that the tools used in the selection procedures have an existence which is somehow objective and quite independent from the organisation. Any possible discriminatory effects the selection tools might have against older applicants are presented as being inherent in the process necessary to identify suitable applicants and a question of objectivity rather than a matter of choice by the company. Through the attribution of any discriminatory practice to the tools themselves and not to the organisation, the role of the company in the recruitment process disappears from view.

The three ways identified of accounting for the lack of older workers in an organisation can then be combined into a single response as above. Similarly, a lack of applications from older jobseekers can be combined with a description of a selection process which favours younger applicants, as in Extract 7.20. The apparently incompatible nature of these accounts together with the use by participants of more than one account in their responses suggests that they are not used as simple descriptions of discrete factors found in the recruitment of employees. It is more useful to view them as a range of discursive resources

available to employers to negotiate their responsibility for the non-employment of older workers and to account for the age balances existing within their organisations.

In addition, each type of account attributes the employment of predominantly younger workers to factors over which the employer has no control: the people seeking work, the job and people who find it appropriate or not and the selection procedures required in recruitment. Rather than being matters of choice for the employer, these are constructed as factors 'out there' (Potter, 1996b). Here the role of the employer in the making of recruitment decisions becomes 'invisible', in contrast to their previously explicit role as an organisation 'committed to equal opportunities'. This contrast allows each organisation to position themselves as fair and non-discriminating employers and at the same time to justify their employment of a predominantly young workforce.

## ***Discussion***

Two topics have been considered in this chapter, namely employers' claims to be committed to equal opportunities in employment and their descriptions of the place of older workers in their organisations. I have earlier in this chapter (p. 215) discussed the place of age and the inclusion of older workers in relation to the written policies of various organisations. Here I will focus on the descriptions relating to these topics given by employers in the course of the interviews.

The participants in these interviews were all either Human Resources Managers or Recruitment Managers of their respective organisations. All were involved on a daily basis in the recruitment of personnel for their respective organisations and attendant employment practices. Over the course of the responses above however the roles of the participants in employment practices gradually disappear. In setting out and building up claims to be 'committed to equal opportunities' the participants explicitly link their organisations to the practices utilised in employment. The interviewees distinguish existing practices from the written documentation recently introduced, from policies undergoing revision and from the absence of any written documents in offering organisational practice as the basis of each organisation's commitment to equal opportunities in employment. When describing the age balance of the workforce, participants leave unstated the number of older workers employed in the organisation. Finally, in accounting for the age balances described, participants present accounts which give themselves no role at all in the recruitment process. Instead they refer to factors outwith their control: the applications they receive, the jobs and people who find them appropriate, or unplanned aspects of an otherwise reasonable recruitment process. In relation to the same employment practices, the role of the employer has changed from being one of commitment and involvement to one of little more than a bystander.

The ways in which the interviewees account for the fact that their workforce consists mainly of younger workers remove from the organisations any agency or control over the selection of younger employees. In so doing they effectively deny any responsibility for the outcomes which are described. At no point in the interviews do

the participants state that they are opposed to employing older workers. Nor do they state that some jobs are only suitable for younger workers. The accounts they offer for the age balance of the workforce however justify the existing marginalisation of older workers within each organisation and have the ideological effect of maintaining the existing inequality.

Similar accounts have been found in studies into other forms of discrimination. In her study of local radio stations, Gill (1993) identified four different ways in which broadcasters accounted for a lack of female DJs in the station. These related to (1) non-application by women for such employment; (2) audience objections to female DJs; (3) gender differences, and (4) the unsuitability of women's voices for such employment. All accounts had the effect of locating the explanation for the lack of employment in women themselves or in factors external to the radio station. These ways of accounting were used often in combination or in ways which appear incompatible. For example, a lack of applications from women could be combined with an account which described audience objections to the employment of female DJs. Gill accordingly argued that these ways of accounting for not employing female DJs reflected not discrete factors in play but a range of resources available to employers for use in this sort of way.

The ways of accounting by employers identified in the present study closely resemble those found by Gill (1993). Employers in this study similarly attribute the lack of older workers to non-application for employment and to factors outwith the control or influence of the employers. In addition, the ways of accounting identified



are combined in ways which attend to the accountability of each organisation for the age balance of its workforce. The accounts found here accordingly should not be regarded as simple descriptions of relevant factors in employment. Instead they can more usefully be viewed as a range of discursive resources available to employers, which can be used to account for the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups in the workplace and which at the same time perpetuate the status quo.

The present finding, that employers account for employment outcomes in ways unrelated to equal opportunities and to their own agency in recruitment, throws some light on the findings of much previous research. Many writers (e.g. Forbes, 1989; Lovenduski, 1989; McCrudden, 1987; Sacks, 1986) have argued that equal opportunities in practice has had little impact on the inclusion of marginalised workers in the workplace. The use by employers of the language of equal opportunities is argued to have done little to address discrimination in employment on the grounds of either race (Liff and Dale, 1994; McCrudden, 1987) or gender (Bruegel and Perrons, 1998; Rubery and Fagan, 1995).

In addition, the apparent mismatch between talk about equal opportunities and employment outcomes has been noted particularly in relation to discrimination on the grounds of age. A study of the BBC, a publicly funded equal opportunities employer, found that notwithstanding the corporation's very public commitment to equal opportunities workers aged 50+ were over a 15 year period increasingly excluded from its workforce (Platman and Tinker, 1998). The systematic targeting of older workers for redundancies together with the recruitment of workers

predominantly aged under 50 to fill vacancies left the corporation with an age profile far younger than that found in other public sector organisations. Platman and Tinker conclude that in spite of the corporation's commitment to equal opportunities, measures carried out to improve its efficiency over this period had left older workers 'unprotected in the workplace and a low priority in equal opportunities terms' (*op. cit.*: 532).

The findings from the above studies, that employers' who use language of equal opportunities do not employ more marginalised workers within their organisations, only become problematic when such language is treated as representing underlying entities such as commitments. As I have argued here, discourse analysis of the language used allows employers' uses of language of equal opportunities to be viewed as explicit claims in respect of non-discrimination. Employers have available to them a range of ways of accounting for the exclusion of marginalised workers, unrelated to their other claims. The present findings thus go some way towards explaining the apparent inconsistencies identified by previous writers, particularly Platman and Tinker's (1998) finding that marginalisation of older workers can persist even where formal equal opportunities measures are in place.

### ***Accounting practices and organisational practices***

The interviewees' responses here then display a range of ways of accounting for the relative absence of older workers from the workforce. More than this however, the resources identified from these responses reflect the ways of accounting in day to

day use in the employment practices of these organisations. For, where writers have analysed data obtained from the context of the research interview and data naturally occurring in everyday life, data from both contexts have been found to display a similar range of discursive practices. Potter and Mulkay (1985), for instance, examined scientists' accounts of theory choice in both interview and non-interview settings. Data obtained from non-interview contexts were found to display patterns of flexibility and variation similar to those obtained in interviews rather than being more consistent or objective. The similarity between the ways of accounting used by the scientists in both settings leads Potter and Mulkay to conclude that data from the interview context closely resemble those found in naturally occurring settings and display the same interpretative practices used elsewhere.

In order to understand the link between accounting practices used in interviews and everyday practice, it is useful also to consider the relationship between the individual employee and the organisation. Within much traditional social science research, organisations have for long been regarded as having an existence which is somehow distinct from the individuals who work for them. Such a view indeed is common within our society, and is reinforced by the legal system which affords to businesses and companies legal identities independent of those who work within them. Many writers however have come to question this dualistic view of the organisation on the one side and the workers on the other. An alternative view of the organisation is neatly encapsulated by Watson (1996: 295):

'organisations [are] ongoing and ever changing patterns of human interactions, meanings, negotiations, conflicts and ambiguities. The organisation is not so much a 'thing' which we can see or touch as sets of stories or practical fictions which help shape relationships within which work tasks get done.'

According to this view, an organisation instead of being seen as an independent entity can more usefully be regarded as an ongoing process of construction and sense making by those who work within it. In this sense employees are the organisation. It is their day to day activities and the ways in which they make sense both to others and to themselves of the work practices used which construct the organisational culture of their everyday work (Bate, 1994). Over a period, these organisational activities acquire a logic and consistency which can make them appear more than discursive practices. The recurring nature of these practices leads to them becoming stabilised in patterns of meaning, or 'articulations' of discourses in Clegg's (1989) terms. Nonetheless, the activities remain the discursive practices produced and reproduced by those who work within the organisation.

In the construction of organisational culture, managers have a dual role. They are responsible, to a greater extent than other employees, for promoting the discursive resources drawn on and used within the organisation to get work done. At the same time, they have to make sense to themselves of their own roles or positions within the organisation, using the same resources in doing so. The ways in which they account for what they do and what the organisation does are inextricably linked through the discursive resources and ways of accounting available to them (Watson, 1996).

The interviewees here, as Human Resources Managers and Recruitment Managers, are primarily responsible for the recruitment of employees to their organisations. It accordingly falls to them more than others to make sense of the recruitment practices in place. Their accounts given in the course of interviews involve the same process of making sense of personal and organisational practice as takes place within the everyday work context. As a result, the ways in which they account for the absence of older workers here are a part of the sense that these organisations also make of their practices towards older workers. Just as these ways of accounting are used in the responses above to justify existing inequalities in the age balances of the workforces, so they are available for everyday use within these organisations to the same effect. The ways of accounting identified in the present responses therefore should not be regarded as being in some way distinct from the everyday practices and resources used within these organisations. Although used in a very different context, it is the same resources and accounts which are here deployed by the interviewees to make sense to themselves and to the interviewer of the organisation's practices in relation to equal opportunities and older workers. These resources allow employers on a daily basis to account for a lack of older workers within their organisations.

### ***A 'new ageism'***

Previous writers (Barker, 1981; Gill, 1993; Gough, 1998) have argued that in 'new' forms of prejudice, such as 'new racism' or 'new sexism', racist and sexist acts are rarely justified through overtly prejudiced statements. Instead, they are more

commonly justified through apparently unprejudiced discourse, including notions of equality. Billig (1988) notes that in our present society, which espouses liberal values such as fairness, it is commonplace for speakers to orient to the possibility of being heard as prejudiced. Statements, for example, which argue against the inclusion of those from other races will rarely do so on the grounds of race itself. Instead, they will commonly be justified on unrelated grounds such as external circumstances or the preferences of others. Justification on the basis of factors other than race allows the speaker to present the argument as one which is rational rather than founded on irrational prejudice. It also serves to deflect any accusation of prejudice within a 'liberal tolerant' society.

The responses obtained in the present study, which draw explicitly upon language of equal opportunities and seek to justify the non-employment of older workers in non-ageist terms, similarly would appear to reflect a form of 'new ageism'. Age balances described by the employers in the present study clearly indicate that the marginalisation of older workers continues within these organisations notwithstanding the direct claims of equality offered by interviewees. The language of equal opportunities it would appear has been readily incorporated into accounts of and justifications for practices which continue to marginalise older workers and jobseekers.

As important as the theoretical arguments are the implications for present UK Government policy as set out in the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999) and for older workers themselves. The present findings suggest that the language of equal

opportunities and even the widespread introduction of written equal opportunities policies by organisations, as urged by the Government and others (e.g. Worsley, 1996), will in themselves have little effect in improving employment prospects for the over 40s. Age commonly receives no specific mention in the written equal opportunities of organisations. However even where it is included, it is often subject to qualifications which differentiate age from other forms of possible discrimination and which offer less protection to older workers than other groups. The explicit claims proposed by the employers interviewed offer no greater prospects for older workers, combined as they are with described age balances favouring younger workers and accounts which make the exclusion less visible. Although employers use language of equality on grounds of age in both written and verbal form, it can be readily assimilated into employment practices which leave the outlook for older workers poor. Until employers use language of equality in relation to the age balances of their workforces, and make their own roles in all employment practices visible, it appears that little will change for the older worker.

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## **Chapter eight**

# **Employers, older workers and the management of diversity**

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### ***Introduction***

In Chapter Seven, I looked at employers' statements of commitment to equal opportunities in employment and their descriptions of the place of older workers within their organisations. Here I will look at the responses given by interviewees to questions on two other topics, namely the characteristics of older workers and the recruitment of older jobseekers.

The second of these topics, the recruitment of older jobseekers to these organisations, became relevant at several points of the last chapter. Recruitment practices and the applications of older jobseekers featured prominently within the accounts provided by interviewees for the age balances of their workforces. Later in



the interviews however the interviewees were asked more directly about the recruitment practices of their organisations, specifically about the importance of age in the process and the recruitment of older jobseekers for job vacancies. In considering practices towards older jobseekers, it is employers' responses to these questions which will be examined here. I will start though by looking at the interviewees' views of older workers.

### ***Attributing positive characteristics to older workers***

Much previous work into the views of older workers held by employers, such as the attitude studies reviewed in Chapter Two, has suggested that older workers are commonly regarded as being different from younger workers. One question put to the interviewees therefore was whether they thought that there were differences in general between workers of different ages. All interviewees respond by describing differences, for example:

#### *Extract 8.1*

CM: Do you think that in general there are differences between workers say over 40 and younger people as prospective employees?

JJ: I think that older people, it's not even just the work experience that that makes somebody u:m (.) or makes somebody, it's their life experiences as well. I think that erm, (.) older people can bring erm (.) the the skills that maybe a younger person hasn't got yet, be it through confidence of actually going through life and erm, (.) challenges that they have to face to to actual experience in another kind of environment another job (.) I think that e:m experience does come with age.

#### *Extract 8.2*

CM: Are there differences in general, do you think, between workers aged over 40 and younger workers?

LL: You're paying for, (.) I don't know, life experience I suppose, e:m you know. They might, (.), it's possible they might be able to, when liaising with customers, have a bit more mature attitude, not be quite so fazed, because the older you get the less (.) you know these things (.) sort of bother you, you know.

Although asked about differences in general between workers of different ages, neither interviewee offers a direct answer to the question. The interviewees in Extracts 8.1 and 8.2 both immediately respond though with descriptions of older rather than younger workers. In their descriptions, JJ and LL each attribute to older workers a number of qualities. These qualities, 'work experience', 'life experiences', 'skills' and 'confidence of actually going through life' in Extract 8.1, and 'life experience', '[having] a bit more mature attitude' and '[being] not so fazed' in Extract 8.2 are qualities particularly relevant to employment.

The qualities are in each case attributed by way of a contrast between older and younger workers. JJ, in Extract 8.1, makes the contrast explicit in attributing to older workers 'skills that maybe a younger person hasn't got yet'. In Extract 8.2 the contrast is implicit through the reference to age ('older') and the use of relative terms ('more', 'less'). Each response functions consequently as a claim for the advantages of older workers over younger workers in relation to employment.

In each case the claim is offered in qualified terms ('I think that erm' (Extract 8.1), 'it's possible they might' (Extract 8.2)). The employment advantages attributed to older workers are thus heard as the outcome of a considered and balanced comparison between them and younger workers rather than being a general claim.

Further, in neither case is age given as the basis for the attribution. Both interviewees make explicit reference to age, JJ in Extract 8.1 arguing that 'experience does come with age' and LL in Extract 8.2 stating that 'the older you get'. The implication however in each case is that the qualities of older workers derive from the 'experience' previously mentioned in the response.

Qualities are though attributed to older workers on the basis of age itself, for instance:

*Extract 8.3*

CM: Do you think that in general there are differences between older and younger workers?

JS: Yeah (.)it's definitely something people, they bring stability they bring ideas, they bring counselling skills, they bring all sorts of bonuses and I think that is something that goes without saying, it's a skill set that they can bring(.) being that bit older.

JS also responds by attributing to older workers various qualities, namely 'stability', 'ideas', 'counselling skills' and 'all sorts of bonuses'. Again these are all qualities which are advantageous in relation to employment. These are not proposed by way of a comparison between older and younger workers. Additionally, the description is presented in unqualified terms ('definitely') and functions as a strong claim for the qualities of the older worker.

In Extract 8.3 the basis provided for the attribution of these qualities is explicitly stated to be age itself ('being that bit older'). There is no reference to experience or other possible grounds for the attribution. Additionally, JS treats the attribution of

qualities on the basis of age as being evident both to herself and to the interviewer in claiming that it 'is something that goes without saying'. Age as the explanation for these qualities is thus argued to be beyond challenge in support of her previous claim.

Two points then are evident from the responses of employers to specific questions about possible differences between older and younger workers. Firstly, interviewees attribute to older workers qualities in one of two ways. In Extracts 8.1 and 8.2 the interviewees provide a comparison between different ages of workers, qualified descriptions and base their claims on factors other than age such as 'experience'. Where no comparison is provided and the claim is made in unqualified terms in Extract 8.3, age itself is given as the basis for the claim in a way which suggests it is beyond challenge. Secondly, the qualities attributed by interviewees to older workers are all characteristics which would make them attractive to employers as potential employees. No mention is made at all of any negative attributions which might be disadvantageous in terms of employment.

### ***Responding to negative attributions***

While the responses above indicate very positive views of older workers, many previous studies have found that the views held by employers are rather more negative or mixed than these would suggest. Following the question about differences in general, the interviewees were asked specifically to comment on the three possible negative characteristics of older workers to which jobseekers'

responses were discussed in Chapter Four. These were the suggestions (1) that older workers are more prone to ill-health and are in consequence likely to require more time off work than younger people, (2) that they are slower than younger workers to learn new skills required in employment, and (3) that they fit in less easily to the culture of existing organisations. All interviewees challenged these negative suggestions. From analysis of their responses, two forms of challenge were identified. The first form of challenge consisted of rejecting the relevance of age, and the second of claiming that older workers are better.

### *Rejecting the relevance of age*

The first means of challenge to a suggested characteristic is to reject the relevance of age to recruitment, for example:

#### *Extract 8.4*

- CM: Older workers, older job applicants are often portrayed more negatively than younger ones in media and widely. How would you react to the suggestion that they are more likely to be prone to ill health and will require more time off work?
- SH: Certainly from my experience with [organisation name] and with previous employers, erm, if you were to monitor sickness absence and do a profile by age, you would probably find that there was as many 20 year olds off as there was 60 year olds! Certainly it's not been a factor for me at all.

#### *Extract 8.5*

- CM: There is a suggestion that sometimes older job seekers will be slow to pick up new skills if there is a job that requires some training element. Do you think there is any truth in that?
- CB: We don't have any experience to show that's the case but, erm, I go back to my point about age being just one of the things that makes people different and I have a friend who is very resistant to change and she's in her early thirties, she just hates change. So she just hates change, and maybe somebody older (.), I don't think you can categorise on just age.

SH and CB both reject the negative characteristic of older workers suggested by the question. Each interviewee initially refers to previous experience, in Extract 8.4 his 'experience with . . . and with previous employers' and in Extract 8.5 the experience of the organisation ('(w)e don't have any experience to show that's the case'). Experience in each case is thus built up as the basis for the claim to follow.

An example is then given in each extract of people other than older workers who are claimed to have the attribute described. SH in Extract 8.4 uses the example of a hypothetical group of younger workers ('20 year olds') to argue that the characteristic suggested, that of illness and requiring time off work, could apply equally well to this group as to older workers. In Extract 8.5 CB offers the example of a particular 'friend', who is stated to be 'in her early thirties' and consequently is implicitly not an older jobseeker. She argues that a characteristic similar to that suggested, namely being 'very resistant to change' is equally applicable to her friend as it is to older jobseekers. As a result, the implication of each example is that the attribute described can be found in people other than older workers.

The responses in Extracts 8.4 and 8.5 then both function as claims that age is irrelevant to the characteristic suggested by the interviewer. Following the counter-example, based on the experience of the interviewee, the claims finally are made explicit by the interviewees ( 'c)ertainly it's not been a factor for me at all' (Extract 8.4), 'I don't think you can categorise on just age' (Extract 8.5)).

While the above interviewees reject the significance of age by way of comparison with others, other interviewees respond by describing attributes which are applicable to workers of any age. For example:

*Extract 8.6*

CM: What about fitting into [organisation name] and the company culture, do you think that there is any difference there between people of different ages?

PA: No I don't think so. When we are doing our interviewing, the way we do it is that my recruitment team are responsible for identifying people suitable for working in [organisation name] in generic type terms, that they have latent skills that we don't require but we can use them, and they've got the personality. Now, a lot of it is personality, the ability to communicate and forward thinking, positive and enthusiastic, erm, you can get people like that no matter what age they are.

PA here immediately rejects the suggestion that age makes a difference in how easily a person will fit into an organisation's culture ('(n)o, I don't think so'). Instead of expanding on this rejection though, he goes on to describe the practice of his organisation and the people that it seeks to recruit. The 'people suitable for working' in his organisation are stated to have various attributes, namely 'personality, the ability to communicate and forward thinking, positive and enthusiastic'. He explicitly claims that age is irrelevant in recruitment in that his organisation can identify people who have these characteristics 'no matter what age they are'. By describing the qualities required for employment in his organisation, and attributing such qualities to people of all ages, PA's response functions as a claim that older people do not have characteristics which place them at a disadvantage in relation to others. It thus functions as an implicit rather than explicit

rejection of the characteristic suggested to him initially. Age again is claimed to be irrelevant.

### *Claiming older workers are better*

An alternative form of challenge identified from the responses comprised a claim that age was relevant to the described characteristic. Its relevance however was in giving older workers an advantage in relation to younger workers, for example:

#### *Extract 8.7*

CM: Often, older workers are portrayed more negatively than younger ones in various sorts of ways - how would you react to the suggestion that they're more likely to be prone to ill health and in consequence will require more time off their work?

JJ: Erm. I don't have stats or anything to tell you about whether they are (.) but I suppose if you our sickness records (.) erm you know in certain areas are quite high, and it's not the old people (.) it's the younger people (.) u:h, the World Cup flu we had was last year erm (.) so I suppose it's just that's just you, you can't discriminate with somebody just because you think they're going to be off sick, I mean more than anything else, I do think that older people do bring a sense of loyalty with them.

#### *Extract 8.8*

CM: One suggestion that is often made about older workers and older job seekers is that they are likely to be more prone to ill health, it may be that they will require more time off work as a consequence of that. Do you think there is any truth in that sort of suggestion?

DT: I think there very often isn't (.) we don't actually measure on age, but the one thing I can say is that where we have any problem, erm, employees as far as time off for illness is concerned it's usually restricted to younger people, most of the illness being self-inflicted. We've had people who found it difficult to get to work, we've had people who've found it difficult to get to work on a Monday morning because they're out boozing all weekend (.) so you don't find that in older people.

#### *Extract 8.9*

CM: A suggestion that is sometimes made is that older people, if you take them on, are going to be less likely to fit in to an organisational culture that has been going for some time. Do you think that there is any truth in that?



SH: I think (.) I don't know about culture but a lot of the young people don't like change as well, I don't really know if it is an age thing or not, erm, older people perhaps have got lots more experience of fitting into different cultures but you know, younger people who don't have any experience of how to fit in to a work team, if you like, or be in a work situation, may have some difficulties.

The speakers above also provide comparisons between older and younger workers in relation to the characteristic which is suggested. Thus, according to JJ in Extract 8.7, in respect of illness and time required off work 'it's not the old people (.) it's the younger people'. In Extract 8.8 DT similarly argues that 'as far as time off for illness is concerned it's usually restricted to younger people'. With regard to fitting into a company culture, SH in Extract 8.9 compares older people with 'lots more experience' with younger people who 'may have some difficulties'.

Here the effect of each comparison is not to minimise the differences between workers of different ages as seen in the earlier extracts. Instead each comparison emphasises the qualities of older workers in comparison with younger workers and constitutes a claim for their relative advantage in relation to employment.

A further point to note is the basis offered for each claim. All interviews explicitly rule out any factual basis for the comparison provided. In Extract 8.7 JJ states that she doesn't 'have stats or anything to tell you' and instead bases her description on a personal view ('I suppose') and past experience in the form of 'the World Cup flu [they] had last year'. DT in Extract 8.8 similarly acknowledges that his organisation doesn't 'actually measure on age' and cites past instances of which he is aware ('we've had people who've found it difficult to get to work on a Monday morning').

In Extract 8.9 SH explicitly rules out any personal knowledge in stating that he doesn't 'know about culture' and offers a tentative comparison ('perhaps'). By presenting the comparisons in this way, the interviewees can be heard as proposing a view held by them personally which is favourable to older workers. The responses accordingly are heard as personal claims by these interviewees that older workers are better than younger workers in relation to the suggested characteristic.

The challenges to negative attributes then take the form either a rejection of the characteristic described on the basis that age is irrelevant or a claim that the characteristic applies more to younger workers and provides older workers with a relative advantage in employment terms. No employer in the present study agreed with or accepted any negative attributions even when these were specifically suggested to them. Taken together with the qualities attributed to older workers in employers' descriptions of differences between age groups, these findings suggest a somewhat different picture of older workers than that commonly found in previous studies.

### ***Age and recruitment***

Following their descriptions of older workers and references to aspects of recruitment in responses considered in the last chapter, the interviewees were asked directly about the place of age in recruitment practices. Firstly, they were asked whether they considered age to be an important factor in recruitment. In the responses to this question, two forms of account were identified, namely those that

denied the importance of age and those that restricted the relevance of age to particular circumstances.

### *Denying importance of age*

Employers' denials of the importance of age are evident in the following extracts:

#### *Extract 8.10*

CM: Do you think age is an important factor in recruiting?

LL: I don't think so (.) we never had, I mean for years anything about age in the adverts saying you know we're looking for, I think you still get a lot of adverts, although they're not saying applicants of ages, they say it would suit somebody (.), we don't do that.

#### *Extract 8.11*

CM: How important do you think age is as a factor in recruitment?

DP: I don't think age would be seen as a big issue in [organisation name], clearly it comes under our equal opportunities policy, I mean we wouldn't dream of advertising jobs with ages in them or anything like that.

In Extracts 8.10 and 8.11, both LL and DP deny that age is an important factor in recruitment practices. This is accomplished in three ways. Firstly, each interviewee provides an explicit denial, LL in Extract 8.10 responding 'I don't think so' and DP stating in Extract 8.11 that 'I don't think age would be seen as a big issue'. Secondly, both participants in support of their denials offer an example of a situation where age would not be used by the organisation. The example provided in each case relates to the matter of job advertisements. Thus, in Extract 8.10 LL states that 'we never had, I mean for years anything about age in the adverts' while DP in

Extract 8.11 emphatically argues that 'we wouldn't dream of advertising jobs with ages in them'. Thirdly, the lack of importance of age is reinforced by reference to another factor. For LL in Extract 8.10 this is in the form of a contrast between the stated practice of her organisation and the advertising practice used by other employers ('they say it would suit somebody (.) we don't do that'). In Extract 8.11 DP reinforces her claim by reference to explicitly stated policy of her organisation in the form of the 'equal opportunities policy', suggesting that her present claim is corroborated by more widely available evidence. Both the examples provided and the references to other factors consequently go to support the initial denial of each interviewee.

Denying that age is important in recruitment can be accomplished also by distinguishing situations where age is relevant from other situations, as seen below:

*Extract 8.12*

CM: Do you think age is an important factor?

SM: No, it isn't really important for us. I mean we don't have an age limit, erm, set against any of our posts, erm, you know, there is nothing saying that they must be over 25 or they must be under 40, we have nothing like that. We do ask for age for the equal opportunities policy, for monitoring but that's it.

*Extract 8.13*

CM: How important is age as a factor in recruiting?

SHU: Well, I mean, having been in HR for about 6 or 7 years I don't really, I have never really noticed it as a (.) an issue, erm, if you like. We are not, as I say, we are not an ageist organisation. We do equal opportunity monitoring information as well, erm, we do ask for the age, this only comes to HR, erm, and this is purely, as I say, for monitoring purposes.

SM and SHU similarly begin with explicit denials, SM in Extract 8.12 stating that 'it isn't really important for us' and SHU claiming in Extract 8.13 that 'I have never really noticed it as a (.) an issue'. Each denial is again supported in two ways. For SM in Extract 8.12 this takes the form of an example of where age would be irrelevant, in claiming that 'we don't have an age limit, erm, set against any of our posts'. SHU in Extract 8.13 offers a wider and more explicit claim on behalf of his organisation ('we are not an ageist organisation'). Finally, each interviewee describes circumstances in which age is a relevant consideration for the organisation. In each case however these circumstances relate to equal opportunities practice and are distinguished from recruitment. This distinction is explicit in both extracts. In Extract 8.12 SM claims that '(w)e do ask for age for the equal opportunities policy, for monitoring but that's it'. SHU in Extract 8.13 states that 'this is purely, as I say, for monitoring purposes'. Through this distinction between 'monitoring' and recruitment, and the reference in each case to the organisation's equal opportunities policy, such use of age becomes an instance of apparent good employment practice rather than being the basis of possible discrimination in employment. Along with the example of where age would be irrelevant in Extract 8.12 and the explicit claim in Extract 8.13, this distinction in each case supports the initial denial that age is an important factor in recruitment.

## *Restricting the relevance of age*

While the responses above deny the importance of age, other responses suggest that age is sometimes a factor relevant to recruitment. The occasions of relevance however are distinguished from normal recruitment practice, for instance:

### *Extract 8.14*

CM: Is age an important factor in recruitment?

PA: Not unless (.) we try to get a mix of people in the company. In particular, just recently we ran a campaign for school leavers, erm, because we want to get people straight from school straight into the business world in [organisation name] and to use their talents and let them grow within the company, erm, with other groups we have not been as proactive, particularly in terms of older people (.) although they work in all the same areas in [organisation name].

### *Extract 8.15*

CM: Is age an important factor in recruitment?

SA: I don't think it comes into the equation, to be honest, I mean, we, unless we are doing something like deliberately going out and looking for school leavers, obviously they are going to be the younger age group so we are targeting younger people, but we recruit them to do the same jobs as we are recruiting people who have just left university, as we are recruiting people who are 40, 50 years old, so we are not discriminating, we are just targeting different areas.

Above PA and SA both respond with an initial denial which is made subject to exceptions ('not unless' (Extract 8.14), 'I don't think it comes into the equation, I mean, we, unless' (Extract 8.15)). This is followed by the description of a situation where age would be a relevant factor. The situation described in each case is stated to be the active recruitment by the organisation of 'school leavers'. While the deliberate recruitment of younger people might be heard as evidence of

discriminatory practice on the part of these organisations, both interviewees attend to this possibility in two ways.

Firstly, the recruitment of younger employees is suggested to be restricted. In Extract 8.14 the restriction is to a particular situation ('just recently we ran a campaign') while in Extract 8.15 the practice is limited to particular circumstances ('we are doing something like deliberately going out and looking for school leavers'). Secondly, each interviewee explicitly claims that his or her organisation employs older workers to do the same jobs for which the 'school leavers' are being recruited ('older people . . . work in all the same areas' (Extract 8.14), 'as we are recruiting people who are 40, 50 years old' (Extract 8.15). Active recruitment of younger people in these circumstances consequently is suggested not to lead to or reflect a bias within either organisation towards the employment of younger rather than older workers. Such practice is indeed explicitly distinguished from possible discrimination in SA's claim in Extract 8.15 that 'we are not discriminating, we are just targeting different areas'.

The recruitment of younger workers is thus presented as exceptional practice on the part of each organisation, and not as regular discrimination. In terms of the initial denials, age is claimed otherwise to be irrelevant as a factor in recruitment. The responses accordingly constitute claims by both interviewees that age is relevant only in relation to the exceptional circumstances described.

## *Older jobseekers and recruitment*

In Extracts 8.10 to 8.15 the interviewees in each minimise the relevance of age to the recruitment practices to their organisation. Either age is claimed not to be important, or circumstances in which is relevant as a consideration are distinguished from normal organisational practice. Subsequent to these claims, and to the favourable descriptions of older workers discussed earlier in this chapter, the interviewees were asked directly whether their organisations regularly employ older job applicants. Again two forms of accounts were identified from the responses obtained. The second of these, considered below, described practices in terms of recruiting a diverse workforce. A first form of description referred to the desirability of a balanced workforce.

### *Recruiting a balanced workforce*

References to the recruitment of a balanced workforce can be seen in the following responses:

#### *Extract 8.16*

CM: When you are recruiting for vacancies, do you regularly take on older applicants?

DP: You want both types, in terms of ages, you want male and female, you want young and old, put it that way (.) you know, so its getting this balance, and I think that that's really what I would be aiming for.

#### *Extract 8.17*

CM: In recruiting for vacancies do you often take on older applicants?

SHU: I think most companies would aim for a mix of people (.) you know, a range of ages, males and females et cetera. That's certainly what I would be looking for (.) when it comes to recruiting.



*Extract 8.18*

CM: In filling vacancies, does your organisation regularly employ older applicants, say the over 40s?

SM: You do need to get a good cross-section, erm, of people, male and female and a range of age groups, I think, just to keep a bit of stability in the environment as well. I think we all need each other to sort of balance off though erm, just to have a good sort of working environment.

When asked whether their organisations regularly employ older workers, none of the speakers above provides a direct answer to the question. Instead each offers a description which appears inclusive of all workers but which at the same time provides no information as to the number of older workers taken on by his or her organisation. This is achieved in three ways. Firstly, each interviewee offers a view of what is claimed to be desirable recruitment practice for employers in general ('you want' (Extract 8.16), 'most companies would aim for' (Extract 8.17), '(y)ou do need to get' (Extract 8.18)). As a second element, each interviewee refers to the categories of workers which should be included in such practice. These categories in each case comprise male and female workers and workers from a range of age groups. The description in Extract 8.17 potentially includes other categories also ('et cetera') although these are not specified in the response. Finally, each interviewee aligns himself or herself with the desirable practice in general previously described. Thus, DP in Extract 8.16 describes such a balance as 'that's really what I would be aiming for' while in Extract 8.17 SHU claims that it is 'certainly what I would be looking for'. SM similarly argues in Extract 8.18 that a balance is required in his organisation ('I think we all need each other to sort of balance off').

A further point to note in the above responses is the lack of any detail relating to the practices of the interviewees' organisations. The descriptions of desirable general practice, inclusion of different workers and personal alignment however all build up a picture which suggests that more specific information is being provided. In this, they display a systematic vagueness. As Potter (1996b) observes, accounts can be built up as factual and convincing in a number of ways. While detail is often used to enhance the credibility of a description, such detail is open to challenge and reworking which can be used to undermine the account given. Vagueness on the other hand, although perhaps offering a less persuasive account, does have the advantage for a speaker that it reduces the scope for any subsequent challenge. The vagueness of the present responses reduces the possibility of any challenge to the descriptions of recruitment practices offered by the speakers above. For them, it allows them to provide responses which give absolutely no information about the numbers of older workers recruited to their organisations but which are more likely to be accepted as responses to the question asked.

### *Recruiting a diverse workforce*

Another form of response which was identified provides more detail of the recruitment practices of the organisation. It too however gives little information on the number of older job applicants recruited. For example:

*Extract 8.19*

CM: In recruiting, does your organisation often employ older applicants, say the over 40s?

SH: We have got quite a diverse workforce in terms of erm, personality, backgrounds, quality, because we employ people with PhD's to do certain you know, research, whatever, because we employ graduates, because we employ people who are just out of school to work in our restaurants we've got quite a broad cross section, so I think in terms of the culture, because it's quite diverse (.) I think what we try and do at [organisation name] and what most organisations do that (.) personality, an organisational fit is very important as well and how somebody comes across at the interview, how they convince us that they will fit in to our diverse culture.

*Extract 8.20*

CM: Do you regularly employ older applicants for vacancies which occur, say the over 40s?

JJ: In [organisation name] we've got (.) recent graduates, school leavers, others across a broad range (.) who bring different things to us. We employ a very diverse workforce (.) people from all sorts of backgrounds, qualifications, experience and trying to get that sort of mix to run the business smoothly (.) obviously is something that we aim for (.) looking for people who will fit in to [organisation name].

*Extract 8.21*

CM: Does [organisation name] regularly employ older applicants?

JS: [organisation name]'s core business is team work, you know, and you need a diverse team to be able to make it run smoothly, you can't have 8 of the same characters or 12 of the same characters, you need maybe a couple of each so, if you have some that bring stability, some that bring dynamism, someone who is very team oriented, someone who is goal focused, you need all of that kind of person within a team and that is something I think goes without saying that we try and do.

Like the interviewees in Extracts 8.16 to 8.18, none of the speakers here provide a direct answer to the question. Each responds instead with a description of employment practice in his or her own organisation. In each case the workforce of the organisation is explicitly claimed to be 'diverse' and is described in terms of the individuals currently employed or those required for the business. These descriptions comprise lists of individual characteristics or qualities. Thus, in Extract 8.19 the workforce is described as diverse in terms of 'personality, backgrounds,

quality', and that in Extract 8.20 is claimed to include people from all sorts of backgrounds, qualifications, experience'. The employees in Extract 8.21 are said to bring the qualities of 'stability' and 'dynamism' to the organisation and to have the characteristics of being 'team oriented' and 'goal focused'.

Following these descriptions of the employees, each interviewee argues that recruitment of such a workforce is useful or necessary to the organisation. In Extract 8.19 the importance of such practice is emphasised in being explicitly linked to the practice of 'most organisations'. JJ and JS emphasise the benefits for their own organisations, 'to run the business smoothly' in Extract 8.20 and 'to make it run smoothly' in Extract 8.21. That current practice will produce such benefits is treated as being self-explanatory ('obviously' (Extract 8.20), 'that is something I think goes without saying that we try and do' (Extract 8.21)). The recruitment practices currently operated are thus presented as being essential to the needs of each organisation

The responses considered here make reference to a number of individual characteristics and qualities. No mention at all however is made of age, older workers or older job applicants. The descriptions given here, in terms of the current workforce of each organisation, the 'diverse' individuals employed and the needs of the organisation, again allow each interviewee to describe recruitment practices in a way which provides no information about the recruitment of older workers. Older workers and their recruitment (or lack of recruitment) in all cases simply disappear

from view. The descriptions provided, although apparently inclusive of different workers, present no information on the specific question put to the employers.

When asked then about the recruitment of older workers to their organisations, employers respond in one of two ways. Some interviewees describe a workforce which would be desirable in general (Extracts 8.16 to 8.18), referring to social groups and the desirability of including members of those groups. References to gender, age and possible other factors suggest that a balanced workforce should include those workers currently disadvantaged in employment terms. Other employers however respond by describing their own workforces in terms of the diverse individuals within them and individual factors (Extracts 8.19 to 8.21). Here, age, gender and any other factors receive no mention. Older workers, along with those belonging to other marginalised groups, are not only removed from the provision of any detailed information but at this point totally disappear from view. What these two ways of accounting have in common is that they allow the interviewees to provide descriptions which are hearable as including a range of different workers in recruitment practices. At the same time, neither form of account directly addresses the question asked. They accordingly allow the interviewees to respond in ways which make no reference to the recruitment of older workers to their organisations.

## ***Discussion***

In this chapter I have considered employers' responses to questions on two broad topics, namely the characteristics of older workers and the recruitment of older jobseekers to their organisations. When they are asked specifically about differences between workers of different ages, the interviewees attribute to older workers various qualities which would make them more attractive than younger workers as potential employees. These qualities are attributed to them either by way of contrast and on the basis of experience, or on the basis of age alone. At the same time, the interviewees make no reference to any negative characteristics of older workers. Indeed, when three possible negative attributions are put to them for comment these are challenged by the interviewees. Challenges take the form either of a rejection of age as irrelevant to the suggested attribute or a claim that older workers again are better than younger ones in relation to the suggested characteristic. None of the interviewees throughout the course of the present interviews attributes to older workers any characteristic which might be thought disadvantageous in terms of employment. In contrast to the findings of many previous studies, no negative views of older workers were found to be expressed.

Notwithstanding these positive descriptions, none of the interviewees suggests that older jobseekers should or do receive any preference in relation to recruitment. In response to being asked about age in recruitment, the interviewees either deny that age is an important factor or restrict the relevance of age to exceptional circumstances. The importance of age as a factor is minimised in each case. All the

examples given of circumstances in which age might be relevant are instances where others, namely 'school leavers', have been selected for recruitment by the organisation. No example is given of any situation in which an organisation has sought to recruit older jobseekers.

Older jobseekers become even less visible when the interviewees are asked specifically about the numbers of older job applicants recruited to their organisations. In response to this question, the interviewees provide descriptions of recruitment which can be heard as being inclusive of many different workers. One way in which interviewees accomplish this is by describing practices in general which include people from a range of social groups and aligning themselves with such practice. Alternatively, they describe their organisation's workforce as including individuals with a range of diverse characteristics and qualities. In this second form of response, no reference is made to age or to older jobseekers. Both forms of response allow the interviewees to provide a description which gives no information whatsoever about the recruitment of older jobseekers. Older jobseekers, in both cases, disappear from the recruitment practices of the interviewee's organisation. Moreover, where a description is given of a workforce comprising diverse individuals, age and older workers disappear from view altogether.

The question again arises of what the descriptions and ways of accounting identified here tell us about the everyday practices of these organisation towards older jobseekers. My argument, as in the last chapter, is that the ways in which the interviewees make sense here of these practices reflect the same ways of making

sense in everyday use within the organisations. The descriptions of older workers and of their recruitment practices identified here make use of the same discursive resources drawn upon by the present interviews in their everyday employment as Human Resources Managers and Recruitment Managers. There too, they can make sense of recruitment without mention of older jobseekers as part of organisational practice and in ways which make older jobseekers invisible.

The present finding that the same employers who provide highly favourable descriptions of older workers make no mention of the recruitment of older jobseekers to their organisations throws some interesting light on the findings of previous research. Many studies have assumed a link between the attitudes held by employers towards older workers and behaviour in the form of employment outcomes. Such studies were reviewed at length in Chapter Two and I do not propose here to revisit them in detail. In one sense, the descriptions identified in the present study mark a return to the mismatch between attitudes and behaviour found by many of these writers.

Such a difficulty however arises only when the descriptions given of older workers are treated as representative of underlying extra-discursive entities. Here I have analysed these descriptions for what they achieve as action and the ways in which they are constructed to provide a positive view. Instead of being regarded as evidence of extra-discursive entities, the attributions of qualities to older workers considered above can then be seen very much as parts of the sorts of sequences of activity proposed by Edwards and Potter (1993) (see p. 86 above). Involved in these



sequences are exactly the kinds of issues suggested, issues such as blame, accountability for employment practices and so on. Additionally, Billig (1987) has argued that attitudes are rhetorical, used by speakers to advance one position in an argument while simultaneously undermining alternative positions. They can thus be viewed as 'stances on matters of public debate' (*op. cit.*: 177). It is accordingly no surprise that the employers here should propose the positive descriptions they do for older workers: the speakers as a result appear as reasonable employers and not as the discriminating and prejudiced employers who are to be viewed as part of the current problem. To treat these views however as evidence of underlying entities is to ignore the primarily rhetorical function served by their use. Similarly, the descriptions offered of recruitment practices also serve particular functions for the present interviewees: they allow the interviewees to give descriptions of apparently inclusive practices without reference to older workers. Neither these nor the descriptions of older workers can though be accepted as mere representations of extra-discursive entities which might be expected to correspond with each other. Both sets of descriptions can more usefully be viewed as discursive actions which perform particular functions for these employers in the current context.

Relevant also to previous research are the descriptions provided by employers of the recruitment practices operated by their organisations. One way for employers to describe recruitment practices, as discussed, is to provide a response which refers to the inclusion of diverse individuals within the workforce. In such cases neither age nor older workers receive any mention. Many writers have indeed argued that such an emphasis on individuals and individuality is the sole rationale for diversity in

employment (e.g. Ivancevich and Gilbert, 2000; Perloff and Bryant, 2000; Ross and Schneider, 1992). One consequence of this primary focus within diversity initiatives on the individual and individual differences, according to Woodhams and Danieli (2000), is that it allows employers totally to overlook group based characteristics and requirements in employment. As a result, diversity in employment is argued to lead to the 'deconstruction of group identities' in the workplace (*op. cit.*: 406).

Kersten (2000), in assessing the impact of diversity upon race discrimination, argues that in fact the discourse of diversity goes further than the deconstruction of group identities. Drawing on Habermas' (1989, 1992) distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere, Kersten argues that the notion of diversity allows employers to re-assert the primacy of the private sphere in relation to employment practices. Where employment matters are in the public sphere, they are open to public debate and conceptions of differences between groups are subject to accountability and intervention. Public dialogue on issues such as race thus requires employers to account for the place afforded to race within their practices. In promoting management of diversity as a measure adopted voluntarily to address discrimination in the workplace, employers are able to re-assert their control over the necessary steps to be taken and the evaluation of these. Diversity management accordingly returns employment issues to the private sphere, to employers themselves and away from the public gaze. According to Kersten, it thus removes from public discussion the social construction of differences between groups and the ways in which these are maintained. The ideological effect is to justify existing discriminatory practices and 'effectively present a diversion strategy that operates on multiple fronts to avoid

rather than to create dialogue and meaningful organizational change' (*op. cit.*: 245). The promotion of diversity therefore is claimed to be little more than 'hype' (Cavanaugh, 1997) or 'rhetoric' (Woodhams and Danieli, 2000) which has done little to improve the employment prospects of marginalised groups.

Similarly Humphries and Grice (1995), in a review of diversity practices, argue that the notion of diversity is less concerned with the recruitment of an inclusive workforce than with the assimilation of individuals into existing organisational practices. It thus allows organisations to maintain and defend existing practices under the guise of equity and fairness for all. According to this argument, the notion of diversity reduces the visibility of marginalised groups in relation to inequitable practices and in so doing leads to new forms of discrimination.

In the present study, the idea of diversity provides one means whereby employers can provide descriptions of apparently inclusive recruitment practices which make no mention whatsoever of older workers and their place within these. In this, the present findings appear consistent with Kersten's (2000) argument that diversity removes such questions from public scrutiny. Additionally, they are consistent with and support Humphries and Grice's (1995) argument that diversity is compatible with practices which marginalise groups of workers. Within the descriptions of diverse workforce found in the present study, older jobseekers and employers' practices in relation to them are totally removed from view any sort of scrutiny.

At the same time, the concept of diversity and valuing of differences fits well with the descriptions of older workers examined above. All interviewees claimed that there are differences between older and younger workers. The differences described can be attributed either to factors such as experience or to age itself. Similarly, in the responses to specific questions about negative attributes, one form of challenge is a claim that older rather than younger workers are better in relation to the suggested characteristic. In the course of the interviews, all the participants claim that in some ways older workers are different from younger workers.

It is such descriptions of differences which allow employers to draw upon the notion of diversity in these interviews. For the idea of valuing individuality, intrinsic to the notion of diversity, requires an underlying construction of difference. Without such a concept, the idea of promoting and valuing differences between diverse individuals can make no sense whatsoever. Here therefore, it is the attribution of differences to older workers which enables the very use of the notion of diversity at all. Ironically though, in its use in descriptions of recruitment practices, the notion of diversity removes from view the very concepts upon which it depends, those of age as the basis of difference and of older workers as different from others.

Discourse of diversity of course is not the only form of accounting used by employers in the present study. Instead of referring to diversity other responses describe generally desirable practices, in terms of achieving an age and gender balanced workforce, with which interviewees align themselves. In such instances, the inclusion of older workers and the issue of age as difference at least remain

visible for discussion. They remain, in Habermas' (1989, 1992) terms, open to debate in the public sphere.

As with the principle of equal opportunities considered in Chapter Seven therefore, it appears that the promotion in the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999) of the notion of diversity will do little to improve the outlook for older workers. Even if taken up by employers as advocated, its adoption appears unlikely to lead to better employment prospects. Just as employers account for the age balances of their workforces in ways which make their own roles invisible, so they account for recruitment practices in ways which make no reference to the numbers of older workers taken on by their organisations. Given the usefulness of the notion of diversity to employers in describing their practices, it is no surprise that the initiative originated with employers themselves and their concerns. However, as with equal opportunities, it appears that the promotion of diversity in the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999) will not in itself markedly improve the situation for older workers and jobseekers. Far from advocating a measure which will effectively address age discrimination in employment, the Government is recommending to employers a measure which is more effective than others in removing their uses of age and employment practices towards older workers from public scrutiny altogether.

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## Chapter nine

### Conclusion

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#### *Introduction*

I have in this study examined the ways in which older jobseekers and employers make sense of and account for current employment practices relating to older workers. Analyses of the discourse of jobseekers and employers in the preceding five chapters have shown the ways in which each of the groups constructs a number of aspects of current practices. The resources available to and deployed by each group within their accounts have also been discussed. In this final Chapter, I propose to set out six conclusions of the study, summarising the main findings of the research in doing so. Thereafter, I will provide an evaluation of the study and conclude with a discussion of possible directions for further research.

### ***Views of older workers are positive***

One topic considered in the present study was the views of older workers held by jobseekers and employers. Both jobseekers (Chapter Four ) and employers (Chapter Eight) were asked whether there were differences in general between older and younger workers. The descriptions provided in the responses were almost invariably positive. Older workers were claimed, both by jobseekers and by employers, to have numerous positive qualities in comparison with younger workers. These qualities included characteristics such as reliability, experience and interpersonal skills. The qualities described were moreover all positive characteristics relevant to employment. Older workers, as a result, were constructed as possessing a variety of attributes which made them better employees or prospective employees than other workers.

At the same time there was no suggestion that older workers have any negative characteristics or shortcomings in employment terms. In the present study, all interviewees were asked specifically about three stereotypically negative characteristics of older workers which had been suggested by other studies. These were the suggestions that older workers would be slower than younger workers to learn new skills, that they would fit in less easily to an existing organisational culture, and that they would be more prone to ill-health and would require more time off work. Jobseekers commonly challenged the negative characteristics suggested for older workers, on the grounds that age was irrelevant, that older workers were better in relation to the suggested attribute or on both grounds. Where the

suggestions were not explicitly challenged, they were either qualified or met with no explicit response. In no case was any of the negative attributions simply accepted. Employers also resisted such suggested attributions to older workers. The grounds of challenge again were either that age was irrelevant or that older workers were better than younger workers. No shortcoming whatsoever was attributed by employers to older workers.

It might be thought unsurprising that the jobseekers who were interviewed should attribute positive qualities and challenge negative suggestions: as individuals who were aged over forty and out of work they would appear to have at least a potential interest in claiming advantages for older workers as a group. When attributing qualities to older workers however at no time did they align themselves with the description provided or did they include themselves in the group being described. The identities proposed for older workers were thereby distanced from those of jobseekers themselves.

Perhaps more surprising is the finding that the employers who were interviewed attributed to older workers only positive qualities and that they rejected any negative suggestions. As discussed in Chapter Two, much previous research in this area has proceeded on the basis that it is the negative views held by employers which result in discriminatory practices towards older workers. Such views, where untested, have often been assumed as in the work of Worsley (1996). Even in studies where favourable views have been expressed towards older workers (e.g. Heron and Chown, 1961; Warr and Pennington, 1993) these have been found to be tempered by



the expression also of negative views in relation to other employment-related characteristics. The present finding, that employers described older workers only in positive terms, appears consequently to be at odds with the findings of both positive and negative attributions or the assumptions of predominantly negative views which run through much previous work on this topic.

### ***The views of older workers are irrelevant to employment***

Notwithstanding the positive views expressed of older workers, evidence from the present study suggests that for both jobseekers and employers these descriptions were of little relevance to current employment practices. Instead, both groups made sense of and accounted for their experiences and for practices towards older workers in ways which made no reference whatsoever to the attributes or qualities of older workers. For these jobseekers and employers, the characteristics of older workers were quite simply irrelevant to employment.

The absence of any reference to the characteristics of older workers was evident in both jobseekers' and employers' descriptions of practices. Although jobseekers made claims for the qualities of older workers in general (Chapter Four), they distanced themselves from these claims. Any claims made for themselves and their own characteristics were proposed and warranted differently (Chapter Five) than those proposed for older workers as a group. The ways in which they accounted for and made sense of their own experiences of looking for work is a point to which I

shall return below. Here it is sufficient to note at no time did they align themselves with the identity of older worker, positive or otherwise.

Employers too made no reference to older workers in describing and accounting for their recruitment practices and the workforces which they employ. Instead they also accounted for employment practices and outcomes in a range of other ways. The ways of accounting available to and used by them will be considered below. Employers' accounts however have the effect of removing from consideration the characteristics of older workers and, on occasion, any mention of older workers at all. Throughout their descriptions of workforces, recruitment practices and accounts for each of these, the characteristics of older workers were nowhere to be seen.

Within traditional research, the positive views of older workers found here would be accepted as evidence of stable mental positions. One might accordingly expect employers who offer positive descriptions of older workers to employ greater numbers of such workers in their organisations. Were this approach to be applied here, the finding that the employers who made these positive attributions also described workforces which comprised generally younger workers would mark a return to the mismatch between attitudes as expressed and behaviour. I have though argued throughout this study that it is more useful to treat the views expressed of older workers as discursive actions than as evidence of underlying entities, such as attitudes or others. Treating the employers' views as actions allows for a somewhat different account.

The employers in the present study provided descriptions of older workers and their characteristics, often at length, offering detailed claims for qualities and rebutting negative suggestions in a number of different ways. It should be noted however that the positive views of older workers found in the present study were produced *only* in response to specific questions about differences between groups of workers and their potential characteristics. Here, as elsewhere, participants respond to these sorts of questions when they are required to do so. Where such responses are all that is obtained from the participants, their value is extremely limited. These responses tell us very little about employers' accounts of employment practices, their justifications for these and so on. Where, as in the present study, employers' accounts of other aspects of practice are obtained, the limited relevance of their views of older workers becomes readily apparent. Rather than being useful evidence of underlying entities, the views of older workers found in controlled studies can be seen as responses which are inevitably constrained in their relevance by the lack of appropriate context. They are in effect mere artefacts of the experimental method adopted to obtain them. As a consequence, such views are of little value in understanding how employers account for their everyday practices relating to the employment of older workers.

Their views of older workers then, are irrelevant to the sense that jobseekers and employers make of current practices towards the employment of older workers. For jobseekers, these views are irrelevant because they do not ascribe identities of older workers to themselves (Widdicombe, 1998). The characteristics of older workers are

similarly irrelevant to employers who account for their practices in entirely different ways.

### ***Older jobseekers negotiate marginalised identities***

The jobseekers who were interviewed in this study used a range of resources to make sense of their positions in relation to employment. In Chapters Five and Six, I identified three discursive strategies used by the interviewees in their responses. These were an age discrimination strategy, an age avoidance strategy and a re-characterising age strategy.

Within the age discrimination strategy, age provided a negative focus and the place of age was treated as self-explanatory. While interviewees worked up their responses to show that age was being used against them, they did not make explicit why employers could or did use age in this way. The relevance of age was simply assumed. When they were explicitly asked if and why employers discriminate against older workers, the participants did not treat age discrimination as an accountable matter. Instead, such use of age was left unexplained and age discrimination presented as a matter for which employers should be required to account.

The age avoidance strategy made no mention at all of age. Age was not referred to in the responses, even where it was explicitly contained in the questions asked. The interviewees instead referred to personal factors which impacted upon their search

for and orientation to employment. Within this strategy though, the relevance of such factors was not assumed. Instead, their relevance had to be worked up and displayed in the responses. Additionally, not facing age discrimination was treated as an accountable matter.

Re-characterising age discrimination, the third strategy identified, worked to redefine circumstances in which age-related considerations might justifiably be used against older workers. This strategy was found to be used only in response to the question of whether age discrimination might in any circumstances be justified. Using this strategy allowed the interviewees on the one hand to accept the use of age, while on the other hand re-characterising any such use as not being discrimination. Its effect was to construct age discrimination as a practice which in itself could not justified against older workers.

Both the age discrimination strategy and the age avoidance strategy were found to be used on various occasions. Both strategies were used to account for the unemployment of the interviewees. The most significant other occasion of use was in relation to the question of whether employers discriminate against older workers. In the responses to this question, the effects of both strategies were very similar: they accounted for the marginalisation of older workers in terms which removed from older workers any control or influence over the process. The older worker could be constructed as a victim of inequitable practice or as someone whom employers choose not to employ. In either case the outcome is similar: older workers remain out of work through no fault of their own.

There is both similarity and difference between the strategies found in this study and those identified by Ross (2000) in her study of employed ethnic minority women. Participants in both studies were found to use on occasions a strategy of re-characterising discrimination. The other strategies vary: denying and trivialising discrimination in Ross's study and claiming and avoiding discrimination in this one. The difference between these two sets of findings suggests that unemployment is an accountable matter whereas being in employment is not accountable. Future work into discrimination therefore requires to take full account of the contexts in which participants' accounts are produced. The similarity between some findings though suggests that the negotiation of marginalised identities is an area which would merit further research.

The discursive strategies identified in the present study can usefully be viewed as a range of resources available to the interviewees for constructing these identities. What these findings suggest is that the position of older worker is somewhat more fluid than other writers have argued. Older workers can be constructed as 'social dopes'. Such identities however have to be viewed in a context of accounting for unemployment and should not be regarded as roles pre-determined by social structures as theorists such as Phillipson (1982) would suggest. By alternatively avoiding age altogether they should not be viewed as exhibiting some sort of 'false consciousness' as Phillipson might further argue. The strategies identified here, together possibly with others, provide for the participants resources with which to make sense of the position of the older worker in current employment.

While the marginalised identities of older workers are constructed within interactions, it is unnecessary to view this process of negotiation as being in any way goal-directed. The Couplands and their colleagues, in the work reviewed in Chapter Two, also argued that age-related identities are negotiated in interaction. In their studies however, in terms of the CAT model the central focus was on the perceptions and communicative goals of the participants. Given the data in this study, it might be inferred that the strategies which have been identified represent the 'true' positions and feelings of the participants towards employment. Alternatively, it could be inferred that the participants are familiar with the sorts of accounts accepted by others, such as jobcentres and jobclubs, and set their communicative goals accordingly. There is absolutely no way of choosing between these or indeed other possibilities. In any event, it is wholly unnecessary to choose. A search for goals would not add to our understanding of the present findings. Treating the accounts of the participants as actions, without recourse to extra-discursive entities, provides a useful analysis of how older jobseekers construct and negotiate identities in this context.

### ***Employers' practices constitute 'new ageism'***

Employers also have available to them a range of resources for making sense of age and older workers and jobseekers in relation to their employment practices. The resources identified from their use in this study were the language of equal opportunities and ways of accounting for the age balances of their workforces

(Chapter Seven) and language of a balanced workforce and the notion of diversity in employment (Chapter Eight).

Language of equal opportunities in employment is found in participants' claims to be non-discriminating employers. In written equal opportunities policies, such language was found to be used to make claims even where no reference was made to age or age was included subject to particular qualifications. Such omissions or qualifications were not treated as detrimental to the claims being made. Employers also used language of equal opportunities in making verbal claims in response to an interview question on this topic. In these cases, employers did refer to age. Language of equal opportunities allowed them to propose these claims even where a written policy had only recently been introduced, a policy was undergoing revision or no policy existed at all. By linking equal opportunities to organisational practice rather than to written policies, the participants were able to make claims of inclusive employment practices.

The other resources identified made no mention of the inclusion of older workers within these organisations. Three ways of accounting for an apparently younger workforce were identified: descriptions of the actions of older workers / jobseekers; descriptions of workers who find the job appropriate or not appropriate, and descriptions of the selection procedures used and how they relate to jobseekers. All of these were used to account for a lack of older workers in ways which were distanced from the control of the organisation and which made the roles of employers invisible. Similarly, when employers were asked specifically about the



recruitment of older jobseekers to their organisations, they drew upon language of a balanced workforce or a diverse workforce. These resources allowed them to respond in ways which could be heard as inclusive in terms of recruitment. At the same time, the use of such resources enabled employers to avoid providing any information as to the recruitment of older jobseekers. Language of diversity in employment additionally removed the issue of the recruitment of older jobseekers from sight.

These findings are consistent with those from other studies into new forms of discrimination (Barker, 1981; Gill, 1993; Gough, 1998). They suggest that employment practices against older workers have taken on a similarly new form and constitute a 'new ageism'. The present findings further are consistent with those of Wetherell, Stiven and Potter (1987). In that study, the authors found that undergraduate students would use language of equal opportunities in response to being asked about employment opportunities for women. The provision of equal opportunities was constructed as being in principle highly desirable. The participants however also argued that in practice such equal opportunities could not be available to women due to other considerations such as child rearing and the preferences of employers. These two forms of account were found to be used side by side by the same interviewees. Wetherell, Stiven and Potter (1987) concluded that such accounts reflected an 'unequal egalitarianism'. While the participants made apparently inclusive claims, they justified inequality of opportunities for women in ways which made this less open to immediate challenge.

In the present study, participants offer apparently inclusive descriptions of equal opportunities in employment and of balanced or diverse workforces. These have to be set alongside the age balances of their workforces which render employers powerless to change an inequitable employment situation. Such descriptions suggest that their practices towards older workers can usefully be regarded as similarly 'unequally egalitarian'.

Worryingly, two of the resources found to be used in this study, language of equal opportunities and of diversity in employment, are currently being promoted by the UK Government as a way of addressing age discrimination in employment (DfEE, 1999). Rather than providing a means of addressing this issue, it appears that the Government is (unwittingly) promoting new ageism. If these resources are taken up by employers, as is being encouraged, then the question of employment or non-employment of older workers will be removed from public scrutiny and returned to the private sphere as argued by Kersten (2000). Age discrimination in employment will thus disappear from view: that does not however mean that it will be gone.

### ***Age is a mundane explanatory resource***

Age as a resource unsurprisingly featured in both jobseekers' and employers' accounts, in several ways. In some responses, both jobseekers (Chapter Four) and employers (Chapter Eight) rejected age as being irrelevant to a negative characteristic which was proposed for older workers. Jobseekers in other responses oriented to possible negative inferences of age, for example in minimising changes

in their own skills (Chapter Five) or in re-characterising age discrimination (Chapter Six). Additionally, where jobseekers deployed the age discrimination strategy, the role of age within that is taken for granted. Jobseekers claimed that employers used age against them: they did not make explicit the reasons for such use even when specifically asked to do so.

Commonly though age is used as an explanation. In describing their views of older workers, both jobseekers (Chapter Four) and employers (Chapter Eight) frequently offered age as the basis of their attributions of characteristics. Age was said to bring many positive qualities, such as reliability, experience and other attributes. In these case, no expansion or further explanation was provided.

Further, one way of resisting negative stereotypical attributions which was identified was an argument by the interviewee that older workers were better than younger workers. This form of challenge also was used by both sets of participants (Chapters Four and Eight). Again, age itself was offered as the grounds for such employment-related qualities.

Where age was used as an explanation, such uses were marked by two features. First, age was offered as a seemingly natural explanation. It was used as a factor which would inevitably bring changes of the kind being proposed by the speaker. These uses functioned to legitimate the claims and the deployment of age as the basis for such claims. Second, age was treated by the participants as an explanation which could be taken for granted. No further detail was provided on these occasions.

Instead the participants assumed that the interviewer shared the same knowledge of age and its role in these instances, in effect knowledge of the underlying reality of age.

These uses of age as a 'mundane' explanation identified in this study are wholly consistent with Bodily's (1991, 1994) argument that age is a widely available explanatory resource. Just as the retired nurses in his study would commonly offer age itself as a reason for not working or for not filling in his questionnaire, so the participants in the present study deploy age similarly. In this study, characteristics and abilities were frequently attributed to older workers solely on the basis of 'the mere passing of time' (1991: 258). Events, in the form of examples of age discrimination by employers, were attributed similarly. The passing of time in itself is argued to have causal force. All such uses go to support Bodily's argument that age can usefully be regarded as 'mundane', as available in situations of unemployment as it is in that of retirement from nursing.

Two further points however should be noted. Firstly, the availability of age as a mundane explanation might have its limits. The participants in this research commonly deployed age as the basis of their claims for the positive qualities of older workers in general. Only on one occasion was it was offered as the explanation for increased personal abilities of an interviewee (Extract 5.5, p. 149). In that response, the interviewee, by the use of a particular contrast, built up her credibility in making a claim which might otherwise be treated as extraordinary. No other participant offered age as the basis of a claim for increased personal skills or

abilities. While stake or interest in the claims being made is no doubt one consideration, these findings suggest that age perhaps cannot be used mundanely in a claim for personal abilities.

Secondly, while I have discussed above the explicit uses of age there remains the question of its implicit availability. One resource used by employers, as discussed above, is the language of diversity in employment. Intrinsic to the notion of diversity is the idea of difference: it would make no sense to talk of a diverse workforce comprising similar individuals. As far as older workers and jobseekers are concerned, the difference can arise only from age itself. Indeed, it is this idea of older workers as different from others which is enshrined within the Code of Practice (DfEE, 1999). Age implicitly is treated as the basis of differences which could be brought within a diverse workforce. Consequently, it is the availability of age as a mundane explanation for differences which underpins the use of language of diversity in this context. It is surely ironic then that language of diversity is found to remove from visibility any reference to age or to the inclusion of older workers upon which its very use implicitly depends.

### ***Both jobseekers and employers socially maintain ageism***

In making use of age here, as an explanation in itself, both jobseekers and employers draw upon a discursive resource which has a long history. At the same time, in using age unreflectively in the ways found in the present study, both jobseekers and

employers perpetuate its availability for such use in times to come. In doing so, jobseekers and employers both contribute to the social maintenance of ageism.

The causal force attributed to the passing of time was noted by Darwin (1861) well over a century ago, and many writers (see e.g. Cole, 1992; Donow, 1992; Minois, 1989) argue that age has been given such power from a date long before then. The meaning of age as explanation can thus be usefully regarded, in Eagleton's (1983) terms, as the 'sediment' of past practices. What gives age its considerable power is not the simple fact of its use but the manner of such use. It is the mundane nature of age as an explanation that allows it to be used explicitly and implicitly by jobseekers and employers alike in ways which are unreflective and unquestioning. These uses minimise the likelihood of challenge to descriptions of characteristics, events and so on which seem entirely natural and matter-of-fact. In short, commonly there appears to be no basis for any questioning of the description provided.

Yet, it is these very uses among others that sustain the ready availability of age. For employers, this does not bring any difficulties. They account for not employing older workers and not recruiting older jobseekers in ways which make such practices less susceptible to challenge. For older jobseekers however, their mundane uses of age come at a price. By attributing characteristics and abilities to the mere passing of time they perpetuate the notion of age itself as a cause of differences. The differences which are attributed on the basis of age by others however will not necessarily be as positive as those proposed by the jobseekers themselves. As long as age is available as a mundane resource, it can equally well be used against older

workers and jobseekers as for them. As Cockburn (1991: 219) observes in relation to gender, 'the dominant group know you are different and continue to treat you as different, but if you yourself specify your difference your claim to equality will be null'.

The uses of age then by the jobseekers interviewed here, along with the multiplicity of other mundane uses of age in society, serve to maintain the very notion of age which operates against them in their efforts to find employment. To say simply that they should cease such usage is too simplistic: age allows them to make sense of their current experiences of looking for work and of employment practices. If jobseekers were to discontinue their use of age while it remained in use by others, they would lose one of the most useful and common ways in which they make sense of their experiences. However, without a challenge to age itself as an explanation for differences, older workers and jobseekers will continue to be viewed as different in terms of employment. The form of discrimination may change but the effect will remain the same. In so long as older workers and jobseekers are constructed as being different from others, it would appear that the outlook for their employment will remain bleak.

### ***Evaluation of the study***

This research was carried out in a rapidly evolving social climate. At the commencement of the study, in 1998, the Government had issued its consultation paper on age discrimination in employment (DfEE, 1998). It was by no means clear

though what form, if any, subsequent measures to address age discrimination would take. Data collection began prior to the introduction of the Code of Conduct (DfEE, 1999). Earlier interviewees (older jobseekers) accordingly were not asked specifically about the two principles promoted in the Code. If the study were being conducted now, the Code and its principles could usefully form topics of questions for all interviewees.

Additionally, it is now clear that some form of legislative intervention in the near future is inevitable, following the 2000 European Union Directive. Again, the social context within which age discrimination occurs is set to change considerably. Notwithstanding however these developments, my argument here is that the present study provides an understanding of age discrimination as ongoing social practice. The current findings are relevant to age discrimination against older workers in present and future forms. The resources used by employers to describe employment practices will evolve in the light of what is socially available from time to time, but at some level these all depend for their effectiveness on age itself. As long as age is used mundanely as an explanation for differences, it appears inevitable that age discrimination in whatever forms will persist. What is required is an attention to such uses, explicit and implicit, and a vigilance towards resources which, no matter how reasonable they might appear, depend on and sustain such notions of age. No definitive answer can be provided to age discrimination itself, but I have pointed here to the ways in which it might be usefully studied and challenged.



Evaluation of qualitative research is by no means a straightforward matter. Taylor (2001b) observes that a number of different criteria have been used in various studies to warrant the findings of such work. For an evaluation of the present findings therefore, I turn to two of the criteria proposed by Taylor and also previously by Potter and Wetherell (1987). These criteria are coherence and fruitfulness.

The findings here are coherent in two respects, Firstly, on an external level, they are both consistent with and throw light upon the findings of much previous research. The finding that age discrimination persists, in new forms, is wholly consistent with the statistical evidence and claims of others that exclusion of older workers from employment continues unrelentingly. Additionally, for example, the finding that egalitarian discourse is used to effect and account for such exclusion both accords with and offers a greater understanding of Platman and Tinker's (1998) claim that older workers were systematically excluded even in an organisation with a very public commitment to equal opportunities. The present findings similarly are consistent with studies conducted by previous writers into other forms of discrimination. Such studies have already been described at length and I do not propose here to revisit them in detail. Suffice it to say that the present findings accord with those of writers such as Barker (1981), Billig (1988) and Ross (2000) in relation to racial discrimination, and Gill (1993) and Wetherell, Stiven and Potter (1987) in relation to discrimination on the grounds of gender.

At the same time, the analysis is internally coherent. The finding, for example, that jobseekers use three discursive strategies to make sense of their experiences provides a coherent analysis of many of their responses. Similarly, the finding that age is commonly used as a mundane resource is consistent with the finding that jobseekers do not treat age discrimination as an accountable matter. With regard to employers, their accounts for the age balances of their workforces which deny any agency on their part are consistent with their claims to be committed to equal opportunities. These instances moreover are treated by the participants themselves as being coherent.

In addition, in the analysis I have accounted for general cases and for exceptions. The participant's claim in Extract 5.5 (p. 149) provides an exception to the general rule in that increased personal abilities are attributed to age. HF is the only participant to make such a claim. In the analysis I have shown that this is treated as an exception not just by myself as analyst but by the participant herself in promoting the claim. Her orientation in building up the credibility of the claim attends to this potential difficulty. The analysis which has been offered accordingly is coherent in making sense of the data provided by the participants themselves.

Further, the analysis and findings are fruitful: they open up for enquiry new avenues of study into practices which operate against older workers and the ways in which these evolve and are modified within current employment. As age discrimination becomes less visible and open to challenge, or disappears off the agenda for discussion altogether, so researchers, policy-makers and others alike will require

new insights with which to investigate and challenge it. This study provides some insights into age discrimination and its maintenance in different forms which will offer such assistance in the times ahead.

### ***Further research***

The present study offers a more useful understanding of age discrimination in employment than that provided by previous research. By focusing on the accounts of the participants, obtaining the views of both jobseekers and employers, and analysing the discourse as action I have examined the ways in which jobseekers and employers make sense of current practices. This analysis provides a view of age discrimination as ongoing social practice. There remain however a number of aspects of current practice requiring further investigation.

In this study, I have looked at age-related practices in so far as affecting older workers and jobseekers. Many of the descriptions obtained however, both from jobseekers and employers, provided comparative accounts in which older workers were described relative to younger workers. In these descriptions, younger workers were almost invariably placed at a disadvantage in terms of employment. Additionally, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that younger workers also commonly come up against age discrimination, albeit in different forms from their older counterparts (see e.g. Employers Forum on Age, 2000a; Loretto, Duncan and White, 2000; Worsley, 1996). One useful direction for future research therefore,

would be to investigate the effects of age discrimination upon the employment of younger workers, the uses of age found in these contexts and so on.

A further limitation of the present research concerns the data which were used. All data obtained from employers, both by way of written policies and interviews, came from employers who made specific claims to be committed to equal opportunities. Although these data provided useful insights into the practices of such employers, the practices of others who do not make such claims remain unexamined. Further work should, if possible, make even greater efforts to secure the participation of employers who do not claim to be committed to equal opportunities. The absence from the present research of such employers leaves the findings and conclusions potentially more limited than they would otherwise have been.

Additionally, for a study of employment practices towards older workers and jobseekers in everyday life, the optimal sources of data would be actual job interviews between employers and older jobseekers, the discussions of interview panels and similar sources. These would provide naturally occurring data, uninfluenced by the presence of a researcher, in contexts where age and the qualities, skills and possibly limitations of jobseekers would be matters of discussion, negotiation and immediate relevance for the parties involved. At the commencement of this study I was aware that I was unlikely to have access to any of these data. If such data were to be available in any future study, they would provide a perhaps more direct and complementary method of investigation.

Perhaps the greatest omission from the present study was any consideration of gender. Evidence from numerous studies indicates that the experiences of older women both within and outwith employment are very different from those of older males (e.g. Bernard, Itzin, Phillipson and Skucha, 1995; Davies and Ward, 1992; Ginn and Arber, 1995; Itzin and Phillipson, 1995). Notwithstanding these differences, gender as a factor has commonly been disregarded in studies of age (for a discussion, see Bernard and Meade, 1993; Ginn and Arber, 1998). Here I also have treated older workers as a homogenous group, paying little attention to gender along the way. This however has not been an unthinking omission but rather one dictated by the constraints of space and scope of the present study. Such considerations though remain to be addressed in future research. In the words of Harper (2000: 117) much research is still required into 'the relationship of work, retirement and citizenship for both men and women . . . and their consequent perception of retirement and later life'.

I have discussed above the contribution made by the present study to the topic of age discrimination in employment and outlined various omissions from this study. The factors detailed there were omitted from this study either for reasons of lack of co-operation or for reasons of scope. It is hoped that these issues, examination of which will lead to increased understanding of many more aspects of current employment practices towards marginalised workers, will be taken up by future researchers.

To conclude, in this research I studied the practice of age discrimination against older workers. In contrast to previous research on this topic, I examined the accounts

produced by participants of aspects of current practices, considered the views of both older jobseekers and employers and analysed the discourse of the participants. Analysis focused on the discursive actions being performed by the participants and the discursive resources used to perform these actions. Older jobseekers often constructed positive identities for older workers in general by making claims for qualities relevant to employment. They did not however ascribe these identities to themselves and made sense of their own experiences in other ways. Three discursive strategies were identified. Of these, two, namely an age discrimination strategy and an age avoidance strategy, were used to make sense of their own experiences of looking for work and accounting for unemployment. Employers also offered positive views of older workers. In addition, they made claims to be committed to equal opportunities in employment for older workers as well as for others. However, employers described their workforces and recruitment practices without reference to the numbers of older workers employed in their organisations. When challenged, they accounted for the apparent marginalisation of older workers within their organisations in terms of factors outwith their control and in ways which make such practices less visible and less open to public scrutiny. These practices thus constitute a 'new ageism'. Age itself is a mundane discursive resource commonly used or implicitly relied upon by both jobseekers and employers. This availability of age sustains discriminatory practices. Until age as a mundane explanation is challenged, age discrimination against older workers will persist in visible or less visible forms.

## Appendix 1: Protocol for focus groups with older jobseekers

- 1      What sort of help do you get from the Jobcentre in trying to find a job?  
- has that been useful?
- 2      It is often suggested that as people get older it is more difficult for them to find new jobs  
- have you found age to be a factor in your efforts to find a new job?  
  
In what ways has age been a factor?
- 3      Are you as prospective workers / jobseekers different from how you were when you looked for employment previously  
  
if so - in what ways  
  
(expand)
- 4      Have the abilities or skills which you could bring to a new job changed over the years  
  
if so - how  
  
if not - expand
- 5      One point that is sometimes raised when people apply for new jobs is whether they have the skills which an employer is looking for - do you think you require to obtain new skills or undergo training in order to find a job  
  
if so - what sort of skills or training would you need  
  
if not - why not  
  
Would you learn how to use new technology if this was necessary?  
  
Are you able to pick up new skills quickly?
- 6      Are there skills / abilities you could contribute to a job which a younger worker perhaps couldn't contribute  
  
if so - what are these
- 7      Are there any jobs you wouldn't apply for on the grounds of your age?  
  
What are these?  
  
Why would you not apply?

- 8 Do you think that there are differences generally between workers aged over 40 and younger workers?
- if so - what are these?
- if not - why not?
- 9 It has been suggested that older workers often have 'special needs' which employers should provide for, such as offering flexible working hours, designing jobs and workplaces with older workers in mind etc -
- do you think older workers have particular needs? If so, what are these
  - should employers make special provision for older workers? What?
- 10 Older workers are often portrayed more negatively than younger workers in various ways - how would you react to the suggestion for instance that older workers are more prone to ill-health and more likely to take time off work as a consequence
- or that they will be less likely to fit into an established company culture
- or that they are looking for salaries which are too high
- 11 Do you think that in general employers discriminate against older workers
- if so - why
- in what ways
- 12 Earlier this year there was an attempt to outlaw the practice of including age limits in job adverts and several countries including the United States for instance have legislation which goes further in attempting to outlaw age discrimination in all areas of employment
- do you think such a law would be helpful in this country
  - would it work
- 13 We've talked about your experiences of the effects that age has had on your looking for a job - have your experiences had any impact on any other areas of your life, for instance relationships?
- What effect have they had?
- 14 Anything else?



## Appendix 2: Jobseekers participating in one-to-one interviews

AR	male	50s
FV	male	50s
GRE	male	50s
GRO	male	50s
HF	female	40s
IC	female	40s
JB	male	50s
JBR	male	50s
JC	female	50s
JG	male	50s
JHA	female	50s
JHE	female	40s
JN	female	40s
PO	male	60s
SC	male	50s

### Appendix 3: Protocol for interviews with jobseekers

- 1 In trying to find a job what sorts of help have you got from the Jobcentre?
  - has that been useful?
  - if so, in what ways?
  - if not, why not?
  
- 2 Do you think that in general there are differences between workers aged over 40 and younger workers?
  - if so - what are these?
  - if not - expand
  
- 3 Older workers are often portrayed more negatively than younger workers in various ways.
  - how would you react to the suggestion for instance that older workers are more prone to ill-health and more likely to take time off work as a consequence?
  - or that they will be less likely to fit into an established company culture?
  - or that they will be slower than younger workers to pick up new skills?
  
- 4 It has been suggested that older workers often have 'special needs' which employers should provide for, such as offering flexible working hours, designing jobs and workplaces with older workers in mind etc -
  - do you think older workers have particular needs?
  - if so, what are these?
  - should employers make special provision for older workers?
  - what provisions?
  
- 5 Have the abilities or skills which you could contribute to a new job changed over the years?
  - if so - in what ways?
  - if not - expand
  
- 6 Are there any jobs you would once have applied for but wouldn't apply for now on grounds of age?

what are these?

why would you not apply for them?

- 7 Do you have skills or abilities which you could bring to a job and which a younger worker wouldn't have?

what are these?

(expand)

- 8 It is often suggested that as people get older it is more difficult for them to find new jobs - have you found age to be a factor in your efforts to find a new job?

if so, in what ways?

(expand)

- 9 Are there any jobs which are more suitable for younger than older workers, or vice versa?

if so - what are these?

why are they more suitable for younger workers?

- 10 Do you think that there any situations where age discrimination is justified?

- if so, what situations?

- 11 Do you think that in general employers discriminate against older workers?

if so – why might employers discriminate?

- 12 What impact if any has your experience of looking for jobs had on you as a person?

- has it changed your view of yourself - in what ways

- has it changed how you feel about yourself - in what ways

- 13 Have your experiences had any impact on other areas of your life, for instance relationships?

if so - what effect

- 14 Do you have anything to add to what we've covered?

#### **Appendix 4: Organisations which supplied written equal opportunities policies**

- 6 government departments or related agencies (GD/1 – 6)
- 6 local government authorities (LG/1 –6)
- 6 registered charities (RC/1 – 6)
- 6 business organisations (insurance company, power supplier, bank, technology supplier, engineering company, builder) (BO/1 –6)
- 5 other public bodies (tourist board, broadcaster, conservation agency, universities) (OP/1 – 5)

## Appendix 5: Participants in interviews with employers

CB	50s	female, Recruitment Manager, medium size voluntary sector organisation
DP	50s	female, Human Resources Manager, large service organisation
DT	40s	male, Recruitment Manager, medium size technology supplier
JJ	30s	female, Recruitment Manager, large financial organisation
JS	20s	female, Human Resources Manager, large technology manufacturer and supplier
LL	30s	female, Human Resources Manager, large public agency
PA	40s	male, Human Resources Manager, large financial organisation
PM	30s	female, Human Resources Manager, large registered charity
SA	20s	female, Recruitment Manager, large financial organisation
SH	30s	male, Human Resources Manager, large public agency
SHU	30s	male, Recruitment Manager, large voluntary sector body
SM	40s	male, Recruitment Manager, large public sector organisation

## Appendix 6: Protocol for interviews with employers

- 1 Does your organisation operate any equal opportunities policy?  
if so - how successful do you think that is?  
what are the pluses and minuses?  
if not - why not?  
would you consider introducing one?
- 2 The Government recently published a voluntary code of practice, entitled 'Age Diversity in Employment' - have you seen this code?  
if so – what do you think of the Code?  
how likely is it that your organisation will implement the code?  
do you think it will be useful in relation to employing older workers?  
if not - do you intend to look at the code in the future?  
do you think it will be useful in relation to employing older workers?
- 3 What sort of age balance is there in your organisation between younger workers and the over 40s?
- 4 Why is there that age balance?
- 5 Do you think that in general there are differences between workers aged over 40 and younger workers?  
- what are these differences
- 6 Does the age of an employee or prospective employee make a difference to the skills and abilities which he/she can offer to you as an employer?  
if so - in what ways?  
if not – can you explain why not?

- 7 Older workers are often portrayed more negatively than younger workers in various ways.  
how would you react to the suggestion for instance that older workers are more prone to ill-health and will require more time off work as a result?
- 8 What about the suggestion that older jobseekers will take longer to learn new skills if they require to be retrained?
- 9 Or the suggestion that they will be less likely to fit into an established company culture?
- 10 Do you think age is an important factor in recruitment?  
if so – why?  
- when?  
if not – why not?
- 11 When it comes to filling vacancies does your organisation regularly employ older applicants, say the over 40s?  
- if so, expand  
- if not, why not?
- 12 Do you have anything to add?

## Appendix 7: Transcription notation

An abbreviated version of the full Conversation Analytic transcription notation (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) was used for this study (see p. 104).

(.)	audible pause. Pauses were not timed.
...	material omitted
[ ]	explanatory material added or material substituted to preserve anonymity, e.g. [organisation name]
::	extended vowel sound, e.g. e::m
<b>a</b>	words or particles said with particular emphasis

Commas, full stops and question marks were added to improve readability of the material.



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- McVittie, C. & McKinlay, A. (2000, September). *When equal opportunities are unequal: justifying the marginalisation of older workers*. Paper presented at the meeting of The British Psychological Society Social Psychology Section Annual Conference, Nottingham, UK.
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